

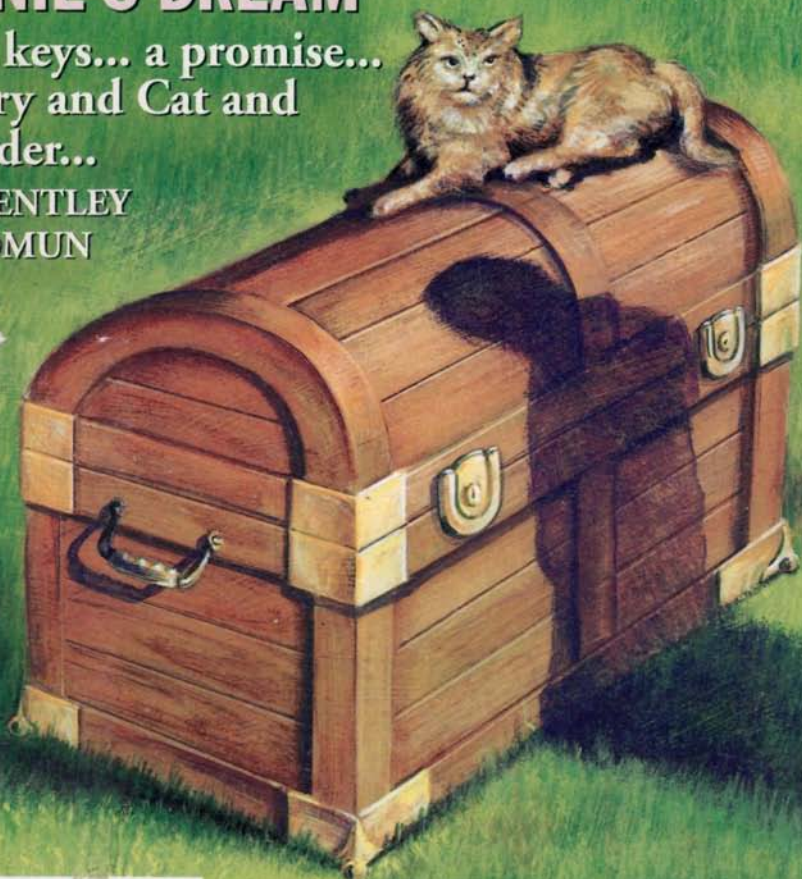
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
Mystery
MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 1999

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murder...

BY BENTLEY
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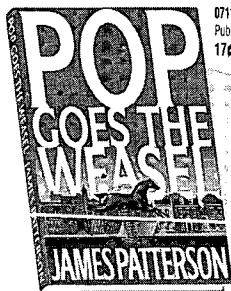


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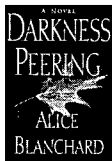
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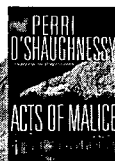
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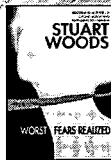
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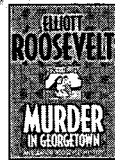
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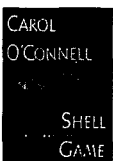
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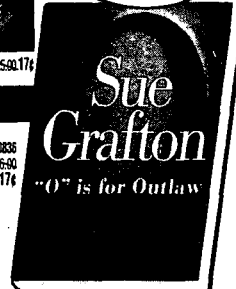


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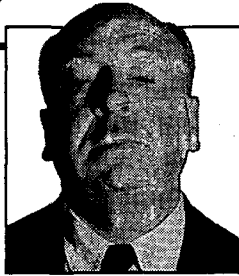
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by Anne Regalia

European wisdom about cleansing the body by periodically abstaining from solid foods led to the development of the Six-Day BioDiet, a program of fruit and vegetable juice meals and metabolic enhancers that cleanse impurities from your body and take off unwanted pounds in just six days!

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Scientifically-formulated. BioDiet's juice cocktails and dietary supplements are specially formulated to meet your total daily nutritional requirements. The lemon-flavored diet tea is a tasteful treat that helps curb appetite.

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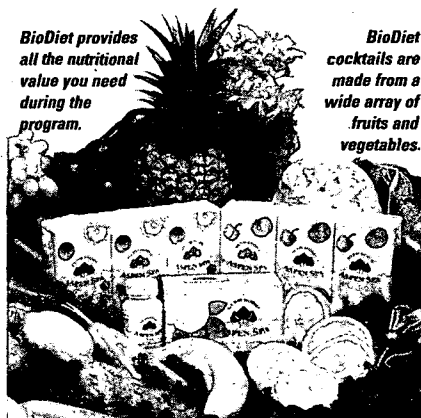
The supplement also contains CitriMax®, a safe and natural appetite suppressant. An all-natural plant extract rich in hydroxycitric acid, Citri-Max® reduces fatty acid synthesis, thereby reducing cravings for sweets.

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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

AHMM had three nominees for Best Private Eye Short Story of 1998, an award given by the Private Eye Writers of America at EyeCon in St. Louis in July. Though the prize—the Shamus—went elsewhere, we were proud of our writers (heck, we're proud of them anyway).

BEST P.I. SHORT STORY OF 1998:
"Another Day, Another Dollar"
by Warren Murphy (*Murder on the Run*)

"Sidewinder" by David Edgerley
Gates (*AHMM*, July-August)

"No, Thank You, John" by Michelle
Knowlden (*AHMM*, March)

"All About Heroes" by Dan A.
Sproul (*AHMM*, December)

"More Light" by James Sallis (*New
Mystery*, Summer)

BEST P.I. NOVEL OF 1998:
***Boobytrap* by Bill Pronzini**

No Badge, No Gun by Harold
Adams

Flying Blind by Max Allan Collins

The Only Good Lawyer by Jeremi-
ah Healy

Gone, Baby, Gone by Dennis Lehane

BEST P.I. FIRST NOVEL OF 1998:
***A Cold Day in Paradise* by
Steve Hamilton**

Like a Hole in the Head by Jen
Banbury

Zen and the Art of Murder by Eliz-
abeth Cosin

Dead Low Tide by Jamie Katz

BEST P.I. PAPERBACK OF 1998:
***Murder Manual* by Steve Wo-
mack**

Too Easy by Philip Depoy

Butcher's Hill by Laura Lippman

The Widower's Two-step by Rick
Riordan

Death in a City of Mystics by Jan-
ice Steinberg

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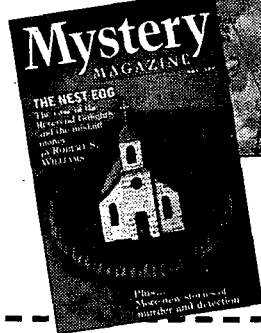
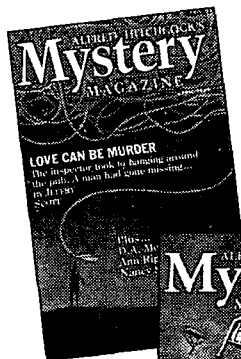
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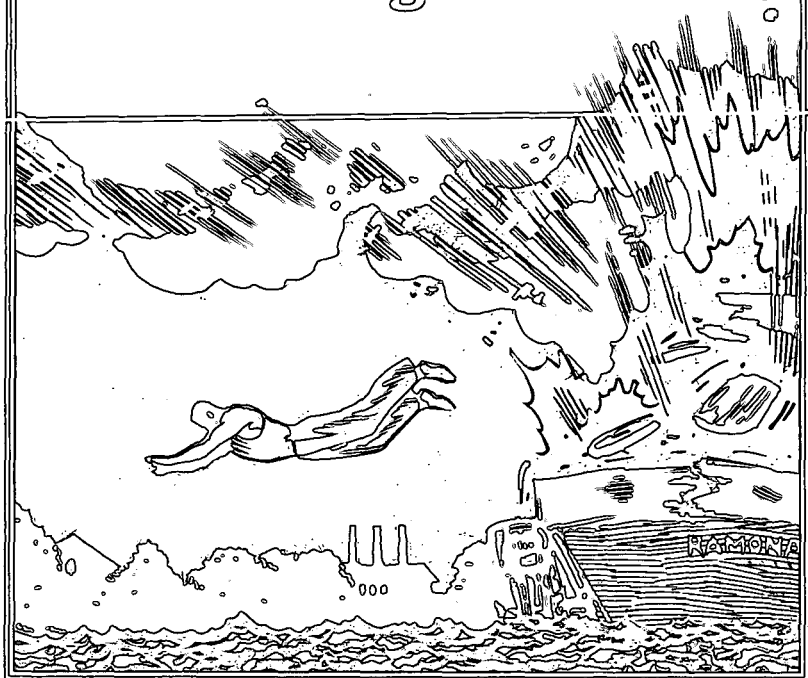
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CRY, BABY

Jim Ingraham



I was enjoying a cup of coffee in Lefty's Diner one warm evening in our fishing village north of Boston when I heard an unfamiliar voice say, "Duff Kerrigan! They said I might find you here."

I lowered the newspaper.

The obvious response is "And who are 'they'?" but I was too surprised to ask. I hadn't seen Barbara in "What's it been, ten years?" waving her into the other side of the booth, surprised by the rush her presence

gave me, surprised to find someone from Pilgrim Heights down here in the working quarter—commercial wharves across the street, the occasional bleating of boat horns, odors of diesel fuel and rotting fish.

I folded the newspaper, set it on the bench beside me. Perfume from Tiffany's, I thought, taking in the fragrance as I watched tanned legs in tennis togs slide across the bench, a manicured hand dropping a leath-

er pouch onto the Formica, pushing it against the ketchup bottle.

"You're a hard man to find," she said. Black hair and long lashes, bright blue eyes no less beautiful than when she left the dance with Kenny Thomas after tossing my corsage into the bell flare of Skip Stein's trombone at our senior prom. Kenny Thomas's father was richer than mine, and Kenny had a Trans Am. We were from Dorchester.

"I'm in the Yellow Pages," I said, noticing a diamond larger than a raisin on her marriage finger.

"But rarely in your office. And you don't check your machine." She gave me a questioning smile. "Or do you?"

"When I need money."

"Let's hope that's now," she said.

I watched her select a coral-tipped cigarette from a gold case, fit it to her lips, and lean it into a small flame.

We were in the nonsmoking section.

"I saw you at Pratt's," she said. "You were looking at one of my originals. Of course I didn't expect you to buy. But maybe you saw a rack of lithographs suitable for framing in the gift shop." Talkative when nervous, apparently.

"Guess I missed it."

"The one you were admiring was labeled Neo-impressionist, but that's just a marketing tag. There are references to Monet in my work, but my palette is warmer and perceptive critics know that I'm quite original." She looked around, maybe for applause, dragging on her cigarette. "I would have come down to the lower level to see you, but I was

on the mezzanine with the governor."

I managed to hide my excitement.

I thought about the engagement announcement on the society page of the Boston *Herald* ten years ago. The article filled an entire column about her husband-to-be, Chester Jonathan Conant, and his many ancestors. There were three lines about Barbara, at the time a waitress on Murphy Street in Southie, albeit a beautiful and intelligent one—straight A's in high school, two years on scholarship at Boston University majoring in art, now climbing the golden ladder of recognition thanks to the sponsorship of her husband's many friends.

"So what brings you down here?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I mean, I'm not sure you can help me," waving off an approaching waitress. "But you have acquired a reputation that—well, frankly, Duff, I need a hero, the old fashioned kind."

"A hero."

"Don't laugh. This isn't easy." I watched her take a deep breath, let it out with billowing cheeks, sigh, look down at her hands, bite her lip, suck on her cigarette, gaze out the window.

"It's my husband," she said, checking my reaction, then looking quickly away. "But before I get into it—"

"I don't snoop on husbands, Barbara."

"It's not that," she said. "But you *are* a detective, and—and this is crucial—you're no longer with the police. That's true, isn't it? You're not officially connected to anything?"

"Only my navel."

I imagined, like most people in greater Boston; she knew about my disaffection. The media had featured the story for weeks: rookie cop turns in his sergeant for taking bribes from drug dealers; peer pressure compels resignation.

I watched her stare out the window, study her hands, drag on her cigarette, nibble her lip, then look at me with what in any other woman would have seemed helpless supplication. But in Barbara Lemnitz, as I had always known her, that had to be an act.

"I know about Katie," she said, which meant she knew about my sister's drug addiction.

Why mention Katie?

"And I know you've been in the marines and hunted down drug dealers and beaten them up," she went on. "That's why I've come to you."

I laughed. "You want me to beat somebody up?"

"Please don't laugh, Duff. This isn't easy. You're my only hope." Again the pained look of distress. "It's just that I know how much you hate drug dealers." She watched me, apparently encouraged by what she saw—an ape who would not have thrown her out of bed.

"There are some people . . . you remember a few years ago the Coast Guard found drugs under lobster buoys down the islands?"

"I heard about it." It had happened while I was at Quantico. My policeman friend, Myron Kadish, had handled the case.

"They're back . . . well, maybe not the same people, but it's happening again."

My interest quickened. A lobsterman friend, Elric Hoagy, had recently seen strangers prowling around the islands. He suspected they were poachers. He had also noticed a few buoys with unfamiliar color codings.

"What makes you think so?"

"My husband," tapping ash onto the floor. "Well, it's his family's, really. They have an old cottage on Pride's Island my husband recently rented out. I suspect—"

Again the pause, the troubled consideration of something out the window. "We have separate offices at home. When I became . . . well, anyway, I had a man secretly hook my recorder to his phone line."

"Your husband's?"

"I don't know what's going on or what his involvement is except that . . . well, I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"From things they said. There's this man with an effeminate voice complaining about our boat, the *Ramona*, which he also rents . . ."

Ramona was the name on the transom of the power boat Elric had spotted.

"Complaining about what?"

"That he was taking all the risks."

"Risks? Lay it out, Barbara, in plain words."

That brought a sigh, a look of disappointment. She finally leaned toward me and whispered, "I think those people are transporting drugs in our boat. That man mentioned a Coast Guard cutter and used the word 'goods' and said he was taking all the risks."

"And your husband knows what's going on?"

"I don't know. He's very naive, Duff."

Chester Jonathan Conant, a highly placed businessman and political contributor, was not naive.

"You can see it isn't something I can take to the police," she whispered. "It would destroy everything. My husband's not doing anything wrong. He's just renting—"

"If he's getting a profit—"

"Oh, I don't care, Duff. I just want it stopped."

She had always been, and probably still was, a very self-centered woman, charging through life grabbing what she wanted, unmindful of who or what she hurt, using others for her dirty work. If Chester Conant got busted for drug dealing, it would raise hell with her lifestyle. But what made her think I would stick my neck out for her? What was she up to?

"Have you saved those tapes?"

She gave me a funny look. "You want to hear them?"

"What is it you have in mind, Barbara?"

"I want you to blow up the *Ramona*."

I hadn't expected that. I laughed. "You're kidding."

"You could do it. Just get some dynamite or something and sink it. Nobody would know, and those people would be out of business and they'd go away."

"And so would I."

"I'll pay you anything. Ten thousand dollars. Twenty. Anything you ask. I just want those people gone. Nobody has to be hurt. They moor the boat in that little cove. You could go down there at night . . ."

Actually I supposed I could. And I could get thrown in jail, to the delight of my many enemies in the police department. I said, "You're not considering extortion, are you?"

She didn't understand.

I said, "Blowing up a boat would help convince someone . . ."

She gave me a few seconds of angry disbelief, then picked up her bag. "I'm sorry I bothered you."

She got up but didn't walk away, just stood there, thighs against the edge of the table, glaring at me. She sat down and whispered, "I'm trying to save my husband, not hurt him. I thought you'd understand."

"But blowing up a boat?"

"I thought you had some imagination."

"I have. I can imagine myself behind bars. It's a crazy idea, Barbara. In fantasy it may look good, but in reality—"

"You did it once before, Duff."

"I didn't blow up a boat."

"The boat is ours. It isn't insured. There'd be no fraud. They'd call it an accident and that'd be the end of it."

"Why isn't it insured?"

"Oh, I don't know. The police wouldn't spend time on it."

If insurance wasn't involved, she was probably right. And although I didn't trust her and thought her fantasy insane, I couldn't find anything in her expression but intense belief in what she was saying.

"You discussed this with anyone?"

"No. I don't want witnesses. No one would know."

"Why don't you just confront your husband?"

"He'd know I've been spying on him."

"It would make him stop."

"We have a good life, Duff. I want to keep it. If the police find out . . . I don't want my life ruined."

I studied her face a long time. I didn't trust her. And I tried hard not to think about earning ten thousand dollars for a few hours' work. But the prospect of destroying a drug operation was tempting. I knew how to blow up a boat without getting caught.

"Give me a couple of days," I said.

A glint of triumph appeared briefly in her eyes as she got up. She thanked me and gave me her unlisted phone number. And I sat there remembering times in high school when she had suckered me into doing things I later regretted. What was it, the blue eyes?

I noticed three guys down the counter turn and look at her as she went by. Maybe any one of them would have blown up the *Ramona* if she had asked him to. She was that kind of woman.

She probably suspected I would do nothing, and so did I. But I spent a sleepless night thinking about her proposal. Would she actually pay me ten thousand dollars? I was behind in my rent, my car needed an overhaul, and Katie could use some help. In the morning, I put in a call to Mike Kadish and met him in a downtown cafe. I had only one question for him.

"That lobster-buoy drug scam a couple of years ago. Anything like that happening?"

"You've heard something?"

"Just wondered."

He laughed—a big guy, reminding me of Lee Cobb, the actor. Same smile, same soft low voice. "Just coffee," he told the waitress, smiling up at her. Then to me: "What have you heard?"

"Unfamiliar buoys out there."

"Doesn't mean anything. High school kids probably. Or summer people just fooling around. Anyway, it'd be a Coast Guard problem, not ours. We don't budget for that any more."

"But you haven't heard anything."

"No. This have anything to do with Katie? I saw Al the other day. He's depressed. Is she back . . . ?"

"He says so. He says she's found a new source."

"If new stuff is coming in off the water, it wouldn't be distributed locally, at least not directly. It would be big lots down from Canada. You aren't planning anything heroic, are you?"

I laughed. "Too old for that. Just wondering."

He gave that a lot of disbelief but let it go. We did some catching up. I didn't mention Barbara, although he knew her. We talked mostly about his wife and kids.

Outside at the curb he put a hand on my arm. "Just remember one thing, Duff, there's still a lot of people downtown waiting for a chance to nail you."

I thought about that as I drove south a few miles to visit a knowledgeable charity-fundraiser friend. She knew everyone and loved to gossip. In five minutes of sitting across her desk I learned that Chester Conant had recently taken

some severe hits on the Nasdaq and was liquidating capital. He was also hitting the bottle and gambling. She said a lot of people were worried about him. Including his wife.

"But you didn't hear any of this from me," she said.

I thanked her and headed north. Within a half hour I was opening a broken gate in the picket fence outside Katie's Cape Cod on Railroad Street. One of the seats on the swing set I had given the kids was dangling from a single chain. At the edge of the lawn a cat was squatting in the sandbox. There were bare spots in the weedy grass. A year ago Al would have kept things in better shape. I guessed Mike was right.

Katie was at the kitchen sink peeling potatoes, her back to me, skinnier even than when I'd last seen her and that was in family court, the judge there giving her one last chance to keep the children.

According to Al, she had skipped her last two appointments with her therapist, probably saving money to buy smack.

She gave me a smile, happy to see me. "Hi, Duff, what brings you here?" Make you want to cry looking at her, remembering how pretty she used to be.

"In the neighborhood," I said.

We embraced. It was like hugging bones.

She pulled away, lowering her gaze. She seemed ashamed. "I get you something?"

"No, thanks. How are the kids?"

"I've still got them," tears coming into her eyes with the helpless look

I had seen a thousand times, the look that begged me to forgive her.

I didn't mention her problem. From her expression I knew she knew I knew.

"I ran into Al the other day," I said.

"Yuh, he told me."

We looked at each other awhile. When the silence became intolerable, she went back to the sink. She said, "Don't lecture me, Duff."

"I won't." It hadn't occurred to me. "Just wanted to see you."

"I can't help myself. Al thinks they'll take the kids."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But maybe for a while, you know . . ."

"I just can't help myself," and she started crying, hands gripping the edge of the sink, body trembling.

I went over to her, put my hand on her shoulder, said something I don't remember. I stayed there a while, then found an excuse to leave.

Out in the yard I saw another cat next to a little red pail, squatting in the sandbox.

Maybe it was the helpless rage I felt whenever I left her house. I don't know. It's just—I had to do something. I couldn't just feel sorry for her. I had to do something.

I drove out to the Spurrwink and had a long talk with my friend Elric Hoagy. There was nothing that went on in the bay he didn't know about. I said I wanted to borrow his boat.

"You know where she's moored," he said, standing with me on his back porch at the edge of the salt marsh, not a man to ask questions. "Just get her back before morning."

And whatever you plan for that gin bottle, get my fingerprints off it."

It was around nine that evening when I walked down the path through tall reeds listening to sounds of traffic coming off the hill behind me. I could see running lights of boats down by the commercial wharves. The air in the marsh was strong with the tidal odors of decay. A full moon in a clear sky made glinting flecks of light on the moving reeds.

I hadn't taken the run down the bay in several years, but with the tide in and little wind coming down Doughty's Sound, I expected no trouble. I had spent every summer through high school hauling traps for Elric. He was my oldest and best childhood friend.

Broad crescents of foam slid up the beach near my feet as I crunched over dried seaweed to the fishing shack. I found the punt upside down, oars under it, thole pins hanging off short lengths of fish-line. A heavy smell of rotting bait nearly sickened me as I turned the boat over.

I dragged it into the water and threw a bundle of clothes into the bow, took my shoes and socks off, and rolled up my pants legs. I fastened my holstered Beretta to my belt and placed the shoes on the stern seat. By the time I had rowed to the channel mooring my hands had grown blisters.

After tying up the punt, I climbed aboard Elric's Jonesport and dropped the clothes bundle into the deckhouse. I went straight to the forward compartment to make sure

the reserve five-gallon can of gasoline was there. I got the gin bottle out of my jacket pocket and filled it with gasoline, screwed the cap on tight, then took it back and set it up on the binnacle where I could keep an eye on it. I checked the fuel gauge and found the ignition key wedged into a crack under the windshield.

The old three hundred eighty horsepower Cadillac V8 sounded just as I remembered it, soft-throated and confident. I made the turn into the channel, opened the throttle, and felt the boat pick right up on the water and plane down the bay like riding on grease, scampering over groundswells, throwing out big chunks of spray.

In less than an hour I rounded the point of Pride's Island, throttling down as I approached rocks at the edge of Gertrude's Cove, little bug light out there winking at me. In pale, colorless light I could see fewer than ten boats moored in the cove, perhaps three tied up at a wharf that had a little waiting house on the end of it, a light on a pole above a shiny roof.

Thirty or forty feet back of a crescent beach were a dozen or so cottages, a filling station, a general store. Rock music was coming from somewhere. At the far end of the cove under a high cliff was an abandoned army wharf. Above the cliff I could see lighted windows in Chester Conant's family cottage. It was off by itself among trees.

The *Ramona* was a fair-sized cabin cruiser moored a few hundred feet from the army wharf. As I pulled up to Conant's boat, I had

to nudge aside a small dinghy. I wondered why it was there; this time of night on a quiet ship it ought to be ashore.

I wrapped a line around a stern cleat, gripped the gunwale with both hands, and pulled myself aboard the *Ramona*. I swept the beam of Elric's flashlight across the deck and saw no one. Holding the light like a club, I made my way down the short ladder into a cabin that smelled of whisky and cigarette smoke. I had to duck to keep from banging my skull on the overhead. I waited in darkness a few seconds, listening for threatening noises, hearing only the water slapping the outside of the hull. I turned the flashlight on.

There were bunks on both sides, magazines piled on one, a six-pack of beer on another. On a third bunk, sound asleep, a pink sheet tangled in bare legs, was a woman in shorts and blouse lying on her back, hands at her sides, her mouth open. She was a goodlooking blonde, couldn't have been more than twenty.

When the surprise wore off, I quickly flashed the light around to see whether anyone else was aboard. I couldn't imagine what she was doing here. I broke into a sweat thinking I could have missed her. Had I taken Barbara's advice—tossed dynamite aboard—this girl would have been killed.

At that moment my plan to blow up the boat seemed insane. It took a few minutes to get my head back into it. I could keep her from seeing my face—just shine my light in her eyes. But she was a witness.

I could go back topside, get into

Elric's Jonesport, and scoot. Or I could do what I had come here to do. The woman was on this boat illegally or was connected to the people who were using it. Either way she couldn't run to the cops. Most likely she was here by permission I decided as I laid my hand against her cheek and patted her awake.

Her eyelids opened lazily; then she squinted into the light.

"Why'd you come back?" she said, shielding her eyes.

"Get dressed. You're getting off the boat."

"They said I could sleep here. Come on! Wait! You're not Butchie!"

Her eyes widened and she sat up and tried to stare at me through the light. "Don't shine that in my face. Who are you?"

I backed away and turned the light off. In total darkness I said, "Get your gear together, you're getting off."

"What the hell's going on? Who sent you?"

"Anything you want to save, put it in the dinghy and head for shore."

"What are you talking about? Who are you?"

She wasn't scared. She was curious and angry.

Afraid she might have a weapon, I snapped on the flashlight. She swung her legs around and squinted at me, waving a hand at the light. "Please turn it off. Why do I have to leave? Turn the goddamn light off!" shielding her face with her forearm.

I snapped the light off.

"You want the money? It's up forward, under the sink. What do I care? Take it. Serve him right."

She was moving things, maybe reaching for a gun. I turned the light back on. She was getting clothes off the next bunk, stuffing them into a duffel bag.

"Grab everything you want to keep," I said. "I'm going to blow this boat up."

She stared horrified at me. "You are what?"

"If there's something you want, grab it. Otherwise it's gone."

"Jesus!"

She slid off the bunk with the bag and hurried up the ladder. I followed her, leaned on the deckhouse, watched her get aboard the dinghy, and saw oars flapping wildly until she disappeared into the darkness.

Under the sink forward of the cabin I found a small bundle wrapped in oilskin. There was nothing else in the compartment that might have contained money. I took the bundle topside and tossed it into the Jonesport. I hoped it was money. Right there and then I had plans for it.

It took me less than five minutes to lift the hatch cover off the engine housing and break through the access panel. I emptied the five gallon can of gasoline into the bilge, then closed the hatch.

I towed the *Ramona* safely distant from the army wharf, flashed my light around to make sure no other boats were close. Then I climbed back onto the *Ramona* and pushed the Jonesport adrift. When I lifted the engine housing, I had to pull my head back from the fumes. I ran forward and balanced myself on the rail outside the deckhouse.

I made sure the Jonesport was far enough away; then I got the gin bottle out of my pocket, uncapped it, soaked a small piece of rag with gasoline, wiped the outside of the bottle, and stuffed the rag into its neck.

After scrubbing my hand dry on my leg, I got a wooden match out of my pocket. I lit the rag, and concentrating on the vague outline of the engine housing, I hurled the bottle straight at the engine.

I took one step along the forward deck and dived across the bow. I was under water when the *Ramona* exploded. I had expected to be thrown around by churning water, but I felt only a sudden concussion that jolted me forward. I heard nothing.

When I came to the surface, something slammed into the side of my head, stunning me for a moment. I grabbed at the pain and drew up my knees, whimpering, scrubbing at my skull. I knew I was bleeding. There was a deep roar in my ears. For a while I was badly disoriented, afraid of losing consciousness.

There was debris all around me, chunks of wood burning and smoking. The air was heavy with acrid gasoline odors. I saw Elric's Jonesport, but I couldn't see the *Ramona*. It was gone.

My legs felt frozen to the bone. I was trembling by the time I made my way through the debris and got aboard the Jonesport. I had lost Elric's flashlight, but my Beretta was still tight against my belly. I grabbed a burning chunk of wood, threw it over the side, and groped

around inside the cabin until I found the squat Rayovac Elric kept under the wheel seat.

I started the engine and shoved the throttle as far forward as it would go. The boat leaped into the darkness, and I headed for the back of the island. Luckily I knew every rock and shoal out there.

I pressed my hand into the pain above my ear as the boat rollicked over the incoming waves. I was shaking, soaked cold, and miserable. I knew the rest of my plan was crazy and tried to convince myself I had done enough, that I was badly hurt, that it would take me hours to clean up Elric's boat, that I had better head up the Sound and get back to the salt marsh.

But I thought of Katie. Wrecking the *Ramona* wasn't enough. I wanted the people in the cottage to know it had been no accident. I wanted personally to tell them to get the hell out of my town.

I was too full of adrenaline to think about how recklessly I was behaving. I didn't care.

I swept around the island to a small cove on the lee of a rocky point where, in moonlight that gave a queer lightness to the beach, I changed into the dry clothes I had brought aboard. I moved the gun and holster to my ankle, then spent a half hour or so cleaning debris off the boat, promising myself to wash it spotless in the morning. Forty minutes later I was tying up to a barnacle-encrusted piling under the wharf in Gertrude's Cove.

In darkness I climbed the ladder and joined people on the wharf ask-

ing each other what had caused the explosion. I watched other boats come in, some from across the Sound at Billy's Harbor. Out near the army wharf, lights were shining on the water, boats moving around out there. No one seemed to notice that my hair was wet and my clothes smelled of gasoline.

From the wharf I could see lighted windows in the Conants' cottage on the cliff. They were obscured by trees when I left the wharf, but there was only one road. As I walked along it, passing people coming down the hill, I wondered who the girl was, who the man was she'd called Butchie.

Where the road bent away from the cliff, there was a gate in a fence under a streetlight and a NO TRESPASSING sign in a thicket of wild rose leaves on the gate. I imagined there'd be dogs. I climbed the fence, and walked up a path dimly visible in the trees.

At the top of the cliff through moving boughs of pines I saw three lighted windows and the edge of a lighted patio. There was music coming from inside the cottage, sounded like one of those Vonda Shepard things.

A stick snapped under my foot as I moved through underbrush. I stopped, held my breath, watched the windows. Nothing came at me.

I worked my way around the clearing to where I could see tables under furled umbrellas, a rose trellis, a stone fireplace. Wind brushed through the trees. I crouched and pressed my fingers into the pain above my right ear. I could feel sticky blood. My neck was begin-

ning to stiffen. I rotated my right shoulder, rubbed my skull, kneaded the muscles of my neck. Nothing helped.

Maybe everyone had gone down to the water. Maybe there was no one in the cottage, no dogs.

Holding my hand over the wound, I worked my way out of the underbrush and started across the clearing. Halfway to the patio I was stopped by floodlights blazing off the cottage roof. A guard dog streaked across the clearing, dived into me, and sank his teeth into my arm. I fell into a tangle of clawing legs and sharp teeth and was fighting to free myself when someone dragged the dog off me and someone else pushed the cold muzzle of a shotgun into my face.

"Get up!"

I got slowly to my feet.

A third man ran across the clearing and pushed me into some pine branches. He patted me down and found the gun.

With the shotgun jabbing my back I stumbled over flagstones on the patio and was shoved into a large paneled room polluted by the sickly odor of marijuana.

Draped in a man's blue bathrobe, the girl from the boat sat on a lounge chair in front of the stone fireplace, legs crossed, hair wrapped in a pink towel. She glanced briefly at me, seemed only vaguely curious. She took her time lighting a cigarette, got up, and started out of the room.

A small man came out a doorway. He evidently didn't recognize me, but I had seen him three years ago at the county courthouse talk-

ing to a probation officer, a woman named Winona. I didn't know his name, but he'd be easy to I.D.—about forty, very slender, pale blond hair.

He strode into the room and caught the girl by the arm, spinning her half around. In a high-pitched voice, he said, "Is this the guy?"

"I don't know," she said, annoyed, barely glancing at me. "It was dark. I couldn't see anything."

"He as big as this guy?"

"I told you I don't know! I couldn't see him!"

She pulled free of his hand and walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

The blond man had strange eyes, paler than aquamarine, ears tight against his skull, no sign of beard on his white smooth skin. He was wearing sandals, bone-colored slacks, and a light blue golf shirt.

"Who are you?" he yelled. "What do you want?" One of those little guys like a terrier trying to make up for his size by shouting. Could own the effeminate voice Barbara had caught on tape.

"What I want is a little courtesy," I said. I turned on the man with the shotgun. "Get that off me."

The man didn't move, looked at the blond for orders.

"Who are you?" the blond said.

"Just get the gun off me," I said, heart pounding. The man looked stupid enough to pull the trigger.

The blond told the man to back off.

"Want I should stand at the door, Mr. Niles?"

The blond snapped his head around, furious probably at the

mention of his name. "Go jump off the cliff, you moron."

The man looked at his partner, shrugged, walked out of the room.

I said, "I came here looking for Chester Conant. Doesn't he own this place?"

"What Conant?" the blond said. "I own this place."

"You must have bought it from him. I was told—"

He watched me touching my scalp. "How'd you get that?"

"I didn't have it when I got here," I said, noticing that my sweatshirt was bloody and torn. "If it isn't too much trouble I'd like to wash up. If this gets infected—"

"You got a name?"

"Everyone has, Mr. Niles. That's your name? Niles?"

He looked at my torn sleeve, at the blood on it. "You came here with a gun," he said.

"And I'd like it back. Look, show me where I can wash up. I don't want an infection. I'll have to get a shot for these punctures on my arm. What the hell do you feed that dog?" I was lifting the sleeve off my wrist. The bleeding had stopped, but there were teeth wounds and two long cuts down my forearm. "Show me where to clean up."

"Show him the sink," Niles said to the man who had brought me in from the yard. When he started in the direction the girl had gone, Niles said, "The other one, stupid. In the kitchen."

Through a screen door beyond the sink I could see two excited dogs running back and forth in a lighted pen. Beyond them was a dense screen of Canadian hemlock. The

cliff would be out there beyond the screen: no place to run in the dark.

I bathed my forearm under warm water, gently rubbing soap over the claw marks, wondering why the girl denied recognizing me. She had evidently told them their boat was blown up:

I looked around for a paper towel. Niles was in the doorway, little man with hair as smooth as seal-skin, pale eyes brooding suspicion.

"You got to be the guy caused that explosion," he said.

I patted my forearm with a paper towel, crumpled it, tossed it into a wastebasket. "You have bandages or gauze or something I can cover this with?"

"Put a fresh towel around it. It'll be all right."

I wrapped three paper towels around my forearm and gently rolled down my sleeve. I touched the wound above my ear. The blood was drying. Better leave it alone.

"You want to hand me my gun so I can get out of here? I need to catch the last ferry."

"You came on the ferry?"

I ignored him.

"Maybe you came on a fishing boat," Niles said. "Maybe you're the guy she saw on my boat."

"You got a boat?"

Niles kept looking at me, maybe thought he knew me.

"Give me my gun," I said. "Take the bullets out if you're nervous. I'd like to get out of here."

"I'd like to see your wallet," Niles said, arms folded, feet spread, about five six, maybe a hundred forty, silly little man posing like Mr. Clean. He seemed to be in charge of

this place, but I doubted he was in charge of the operation despite his airs of importance.

I could have walked right over him, but there was a man behind me. And the one with the dog, where was he? And the one with the shotgun?

"Your wallet," Niles said.

I looked at the man behind me, at the automatic in his hand. He patted me down.

"No wallet," he told Niles.

I took a small step backward, turned angrily toward Niles. "What the hell's going on? I come here looking for a friend of mine. You put a dog on me, put a shotgun on me. And now this little jerk—" I swung around, knocking the gun out of the man's hand. I grabbed hold of his shirt and threw him across the room. As Niles stooped to pick up the gun, I dropped an arm past him, got the gun, and shouldered him into the kitchen wall. My mouth an inch from his eyes, I yelled, "Are you Butchie?"

"What?"

"They call you Butchie?"

"Who the hell are you?" Niles said, pulling his head back, scared.

"I'm the guy who blew your boat up! The guy who's gonna blow your head off you don't clear out of here. You tell your people it's over. No more! I find you back here I'll rip your heart out. You hear me?"

All of this blasted into Niles' face as I lifted him up the wall, then turned and slammed him onto the kitchen table, the pale eyes witless as jellyfish.

Scared of the man with the shotgun, I ran out the door. In darkness

behind the dog pen I fell over a bush and sprawled into something that felt like sawdust and smelled of dog. My face went right into it.

I cursed and scrambled to my feet. No shotgun blast. Nobody yelled. I ran over patches of window light and got to the path that led down to the road, scraping dog off my face, slapping it off my hands, brushing it off my sweatshirt.

They hadn't fired because gunfire would tell everyone on the island who they were. I slowed down, heart pounding, chest burning with pain.

Three girls on a stone wall in jeans and sweatshirts giggled at me as I trotted slowly over asphalt and broken cobblestones. Beyond the roofs of fishing shacks I could see a dozen or so people down at the end of the wharf, fewer than had been there earlier. Lights were moving over the water off the end of the army wharf, maybe harbor police. If they came in and looked hard at Elric's Jonesport, I'd have a serious problem.

Down on the wharf I stood near the ladder a few minutes, heard an old man saying, "Saw a flashlight out there just afore the explosion."

"Myself," a woman said, "I like the oily rag theory. Ever seen those people? Don't know nawthin' about boats. Farmers is what they are."

My head ached. My arms ached. To hell with this.

I started down the ladder, froze, then plunged down out of sight, banging my shin on the bowstem as I stumbled trying to get aboard the Jonesport. Bobby Soresi was out there at the end of the wharf

under the light, one of the cops who hated me. He'd smell the gasoline on my clothes. He'd see the cut on my head, the blood on my torn sleeve. He'd link me to the explosion. Nothing would please him more than to throw handcuffs on me. Did he live down here?

I leaned over the side of Elric's Jonesport and dipped my hands into cold ocean and splashed my face, wondering whether to move out, hide in the boat, go over the side, or go back up the ladder.

Everyone on the wharf, including Soresi, would look at me if I moved the boat out. If I stayed here . . . There was evidence all over the boat, all over me.

I went back up the ladder, turned my face from where Soresi was, slouched past two old women in straw hats, and moved slowly over the wooden planks to the cobblestones on the road. I stepped into a drainage ditch, got up on a stone wall and sat there in darkness twenty feet from the road communing with my headache and small wounds and wondering what to do.

Because I had to get Elric's boat safely off the island, I had no choice but to wait until everybody had left the wharf.

Other than blowing up the *Ramona*, what had I accomplished? They had my face. They would report me to their people, who might decide to abandon the location and might decide to come after me with a shotgun.

Only a few people were still on the wharf when I saw the girl from the cottage. She was up the hill under a light, leaning on the wind-

break of the telephone booth at the general store. I watched her come down the hill, walking past me on the road.

Who was she? She apparently had not wanted to win points with Niles, or she would have identified me. She'd thought I was someone called Butchie, and she wondered why I had come back. Then she said "they" said she could sleep on the boat. So apparently Butchie was not part of the group in the cottage.

But Niles knew about Butchie. And that might explain his uncertainty about whether it was I who had blown up the *Ramona*. Maybe Butchie did it.

I watched the girl go to the end of the wharf and sit on a bench under the light. Soresi spoke to her before he left the wharf; maybe just concerned about her safety out there by herself. He didn't see me or look for me as he went up the hill. When he was gone and everyone except the girl had left the wharf, I considered having a talk with her, but I waited.

I watched her lean on the butt ends of the corner pilings. Beyond her, out in the channel, I saw the running lights of a small boat coming in, a boat she had apparently been waiting for. When I lost sight of her, I got off the wall and ran down the road. I heard the roar of an engine and saw the boat make a big swing out toward the channel buoys. The girl was on the boat, a tall man at the wheel.

I scrambled down the ladder onto the Jonesport and headed up the channel, following the small

boat at a discreet distance. It went past commercial downtown and headed into the estuary at the Yacht Club. I throttled down and slowly moved into the shadow of a yawl. I tied up and waited on the catwalk watching the man and the girl pass under lights at the security shack.

I found a watchman in a chair behind the shack under a light. He was reading a newspaper, chewing an unlit cigar.

"The man who just came in with a girl," I said.

"Butchie Conant. What about him?"

"Butchie? Is that Chester Conant?"

"Don't think he's got a twin brother."

"Who's the girl?"

"Gretchen Parker, think her name is. Lives down the islands somewhere."

"His daughter?"

That got a rich laugh. "I don't think so," and went back to the newspaper, still laughing.

The sky was brightening on the horizon by the time I got home. My body ached from having spent two hours cleaning up the Jonesport. Before going to bed, I opened the oilskin package and found several bundles of twenty- and fifty-dollar bills, had to be something like fifty thousand dollars. Gretchen could have taken it with her in the dinghy, but she gave it to me and said it would "serve him right." Serve who right?

I slept until noon, having lain awake for hours thinking about

Chester Conant and Gretchen and the money. I got dressed, stopped at a Dunkin' Donuts for coffee, then went downtown to the county courthouse where I found Winona Dyer unlocking the door of her office, just back from lunch. She knew Niles well.

"Name's Arthur. And he's on a short string. You got something on him?"

"It's pending," I said, watching her fingers dance over tabs in a file drawer. She pulled out a yellow folder.

"Works at The Outer Edge," she said. "That's a frame shop up on Congress Street."

My gut tightened. "Doesn't Barbara Conant own that?"

She studied the file. "Yuh. Barbara Conant. You know her?"

"Heard of her."

"It's one of those Junior League things," Winona said. "Hire the unfortunate is how they think of these guys. I guess they make points somewhere rehabilitating ex-cons. Or think they do." She gave me a hard study. "Is he in violation?"

"In spades," I said. "But it's nothing I can give you right now."

"But you will give it to me? I don't want the cops getting there first."

"You know Mike Kadish."

"Sure."

"I want you to go over to the station and sit with him, tell him something's brewing, and wait for my call."

Her face wrinkled up with a puzzled look. "About what?"

"You mention my name and Mike'll know. Tell him not to close in on Niles until I call you. If Niles

is home and everything goes right, that'll be in an hour."

"What's going on?"

"Will you do it?"

She shrugged. "You have to be so mysterious?"

"Give me an hour," I said.

I got Arthur Niles' address, and within ten minutes I was in a hallway in a converted mansion on the Eastern Promenade. A barefoot boy in jeans and golf shirt responded to my knock.

"I'm looking for Arthur . . ." was all I got out when the boy shook his head and tried to close the door.

I put one hand on the door, the other on the boy's chest, and bullied him across a varnished oak floor to a small bedroom that smelled of Clorox. Niles, in boxer shorts and T-shirt, was sitting on an unmade bed putting socks on.

"You ever heard of privacy?" he yelled. "Get the hell out of my home!"

As though my presence was only an annoyance, he got up and pulled slacks up his legs.

"Going somewhere?" I said, pointing at two suitcases.

I heard the front door open, then slam shut. I guessed the boy wanted no part of what was happening.

"You really cost me," Niles said, fitting small feet into running shoes.

"The boat wasn't yours, Arthur."

"I don't mean the boat. I had sixty thousand dollars—"

"In an oilskin bundle under the sink."

He looked up in hopeful disbelief. "You've got it?"

"Who were you stealing it from?"

"It wasn't for me," he said. "It was for . . ."

He got up and walked past me to a closet full of empty hangers. He found a golf shirt in back, smelled it, made a face, threw it on the floor, reached in and got another. This one apparently smelled better.

"If I tell you . . . if you could give me some of it, like ten grand, or even five. I gotta get away."

"I don't want any of it," I said. "I just want names. Who were you stealing the money from? Who were you stealing it for? Names, Arthur. That's all I want. You can have the money."

He gave that a lot of thought, took a few deep breaths, searched my face, probably wondering whether to trust me.

I decided to make it easy for him. "How much of this does Barbara Conant know?"

That caused a nervous giggle of relief. "Know? Are you kidding? It was her idea."

"To smuggle drugs?"

"She wanted money. She didn't care how she got it. She's not as rich as people think. I told her about these guys I knew in prison. Renting them the cottage and the boat was her idea."

"Her husband wasn't in on it?"

"Not at first. He was just worried about Gretchen—the girl you saw. He'd been keeping her there. We agreed to let her stay on the boat. She's got family down there."

"Did Barbara know?"

"She just found out this past Sunday. Saw Gretchen out on the grass in a bikini."

"With her husband."

"No, but she knew. You could see it in her eyes. She's fierce, man."

"Did she know Gretchen slept on the boat?"

"I told her."

I gave that a few seconds. "You're sure she knew?"

"Of course. I told her."

"And I'll bet you enjoyed it," I said, watching him at the closet mirror combing his hair.

He grinned at my image in the mirror. "Immensely," he said. "You have no idea how egotistical that woman is."

I let that slide by. "She know about the money?"

"Of course. It's hers."

"She knew you kept it on the boat?"

"Nobody knew that . . . maybe Gretchen. She saw me—"

"And you want to take it and run. You don't think Barbara'll track you down?"

"Maybe not."

"What if you give the money to her? Or split it with her? The cops don't know what you were involved in. And she wouldn't chase after you. You'd be free."

"Except for you."

He didn't trust me, but he seemed to like what I was suggesting.

"I just want you out of here, Arthur," I said. "I hate drugs. I hate drug dealers. I just want you gone."

"And you don't want the money?"

"Not a cent," I said.

We went into the kitchen where I joined him for coffee. He told me a little about the operation, claimed he didn't know who was in charge, said he lifted the stuff out of containers hanging off buoys and de-

livered the containers, unopened, to a man on Bailey's Island.

"And the money?"

"It's at every exchange. I buy the goods; the man on Bailey's Island buys them from me. That's how it works. I turn what I make over to her."

"Did she call you today, wondering where her money was?"

"This morning. Screaming."

"You told her about me?"

"She wasn't listening. She just wanted the money. She called me every kind of idiot when I told her it went down with the boat."

"Did she ask about Gretchen?"

"No."

I supposed she wouldn't. She would deny knowing anything about the girl. And of course she would deny ever having dealt with me. Because Niles was an ex-con, he wouldn't have much credibility: she could successfully deny having known anything about the drug operation. And my reputation would guarantee my conviction for using violence against drug dealers. The death of the girl would make it felony murder.

And nothing would point at her except rent receipts. Otherwise she dealt only in cash.

"Get on the phone," I said, "and tell Barbara you have the money."

A menace in my voice scared him. "I already told her—"

"Tell her you found it floating out there. Tell her the girl had it. Tell her anything. But say you've got it and she can pick it up here. Tell her you'll leave the door open, it'll be in the oilskin on your coffee table."

"No . . ."

I slammed my palm on the table, knocking his cup out of the saucer, spilling coffee in his lap. "Do it!"

He went to the phone, stood there several seconds, finally picked up the handset.

"I've got the money in my car," I said. "We'll go down and get it. I'll give you what you need and you can take off."

He punched in some numbers and gave the message to Barbara. He said his front door would be open, the oilskin bundle would be on the coffee table. He did not tell her he would be gone.

He brought the two suitcases down to his car, a Buick with a tag number I carefully memorized. I let him open the oilskin bundle, take three packets, then rewrap the money. I watched him run to his car. I watched the car speed away.

I got my cell phone off the front seat of my car and called Winona, gave her the tag number of the Buick and told her what to look for. I got Mike on the phone and told him to get here as fast as he could. "I'll be down the street in my car."

"What the hell's going on?"

"I don't have time, Mike. Please, just get over here."

I wrapped the oilskin bundle in newspaper so my prints wouldn't be on it. I carried it to Niles' apart-

ment and set it on the coffee table, took the newspaper back to my car, drove down the block and pulled into a parking lot and waited.

Barbara got there before I saw any sign of Mike. I sweated out the next few minutes. If she got away, I'd never be able to prove anything against her. But Mike pulled up to the curb down the block just as Barbara disappeared into the building.

I caught up with him and explained what was happening.

"You blew up the boat?"

"Believe what you want," I said, thinking only Gretchen could put me on the *Ramona*, and she was out of it: if I didn't mention her, who would? Not Barbara.

"So what's going on?"

"You and Winona have just broken up a major drug operation," I said. "She's chasing down a little guy who'll tell you everything you need to know."

When Barbara came out of the building carrying the oilskin bundle, we were on the sidewalk waiting for her. She looked at us and stopped dead in her tracks, hugging the bundle to her bosom. Mike Kadish was grinning, holding his badge out for her to stare at so she could not fail to realize who he was.

I wish you could have seen the look on her face.

FICTION

PRINCESS ROLANDA

Dan A. Sproul



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/99

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She drove a brand new black Lincoln. She was gorgeous, and she spoke perfect English, assets most sought after by the Cuban female population in Miami—and the males, too, if you think about it. And, she was famous. But I didn't know that right off. I wasn't big on Latin television. I found out that *she* was though . . . big, that is . . . on Latin television.

I guided her to my client chair. I have only one. She was an exceptionally beautiful woman, absolutely dazzling. It was difficult not to stare, yet embarrassing to continually not look at her. Some women do that to you. She seemed oblivious to my predicament.

"What a nice picture," she commented, with just a slight accent.

"That," I told her, "is a specially enlarged photograph of Seattle Slew opening his lead into the far turn at Pimlico in the 1977 Preakness Stakes. A friend of mine made it for me. That horse breathing hard there, behind The Slew, is Cormorant, a pretty good horse in his day also."

"It's very nice," she said again. Small talk. She was thrashing about the point—probably hated the picture. But I loved to listen to her. The voice matched the face and body. If she had a flaw anywhere, I couldn't detect it. And I'm supposed to be the detective.

Joe Standard's the name, owner and sole operative of Standard Investigations. Beautiful females did not, as a rule, number among the degenerate slugs and other losers that populate the world I work in. It was a refreshing twist. She ner-

vously eyed the cot that rested against the wall under the giant photo of Slew.

"I sometimes nap in the office," I offered, to ease her apprehension.

She nodded knowingly. She was really something to look at. I dragged my eyes away and moved my rolling chair up tight to the desk. I had my business decorum to consider. "What is it I can do for you?" I asked.

"You don't recognize me, then?"

"Should I?"

"I'm Princess Rolanda," she revealed. I must have continued staring with my mouth open. "From Channel 61?" she prompted.

"Sorry."

"Well, it doesn't matter," she said. "It would save time if you had ever watched my program. I'm a psychic. I have a panel of four psychics on my program. It's a call-in show. There is also a private nine hundred number, a call-in psychic service that I run. The show is simply a method to promote the call-in number for our psychics. But it's quite popular. We answer questions pertaining to a person's love life, their future or wealth—that sort of thing. We also have two channelers who can communicate with your dead relatives. We can identify your past lives. We do all sorts of things."

"What kind of conversation could you have with a dead relative?" I asked. "I didn't even talk to my relatives when they were alive."

"Many people wish to communicate with loved ones," she said sternly, allowing me to wallow in my insensitivity.

"Yes, I'm sure they do," I hastily

agreed, but too late. The impression of me as an unfeeling slob was no doubt already impressed upon her lovely psychic brain.

"You don't believe in psychic ability, do you?" she stated flatly.

"Well, ahh . . . I wouldn't go that far. I haven't stayed up nights thinking about it much."

"Why don't I give you a reading?" she suggested.

Her proposal triggered a thought. "I don't know about a reading for me, but . . ."

I extracted the *Racing Form* from my desk drawer and opened it to the fourth race. "Do you know what this is?" I asked her.

"Some sort of racing paper?"

"Yes—a racing paper. You will notice that there are ten names listed there in bold print. Those are the names of the entries for the fourth race at Calder. Those little lines underneath are the horse's past performance record—his running record for the last eight or ten races."

"Oh yes, I see."

"Okay, so who's goin' to win?"

The request sank in. She looked up from the *Form* to face me squarely. Her black hair, dark eyes, and very red lips radiated heat across the desk.

"Just a kind of test," I offered feebly.

She was peeved. Her temper began to peek out at me—finally a flaw. "As a psychic, I have only impressions and vague feelings about such things—nothing specific." She spoke in a controlled way, but the hint of anger was evident.

"I know what you mean," I said.

"That's kinda how I feel when I get a race as tight as this one."

Her dark eyes sparkled. "You're mocking me. I won't have it." She placed her fingertips on each of the entry names and ran down the list. She went back to a horse by the name of Dragon Breath several times. "This horse," she announced, "will not win. There is a darkness on him. No good things will happen for him. That's all I get."

"I hesitate to bring this up," I said, "but there is little point in uncovering who is *not* goin' to win." It was, unfortunately, all the answer to be had from her on the subject.

She made it quite clear that her visit to my establishment was not to pick me a winner.

"Are you familiar with the Spanish newspaper *Palabra Nueva*?" she asked.

"Nope. Don't read Spanish."

"It is a small publication. The owner is Angel Rivera. I used to date him."

"Lucky him," I contributed.

That smoldering, impatient anger, seething just below the surface, struggled to burst forth. She pushed it down at the last moment. "I hope you are taking this seriously. Because, I assure you, it's a very serious matter."

"I take everything seriously. It's my job."

The essence of her tale was that Rivera, a disgruntled former boyfriend, had been running a vicious campaign of editorial comment to discredit psychics in general and her operation in particular. It was, she feared, going to hurt her business.

"Why do you think he's attacking you?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" she fumed. "He's doing it to get back at me for dumping him. I thought you were a detective."

As beautiful as she was, it was apparent that she was not someone you warmed up to easily. "And you expect me to do what?" I asked.

"Before we get to that, there is one other thing you need to know." "And that would be?"

She began haltingly: "Angel—in his paper—has issued a challenge. He . . . that is, his father is a trainer at Calder racetrack. His father's name is Hector—Hector Rivera. There is supposed to be a big race Saturday at Calder. His father has a horse entered."

She stopped there. "Okay," I prompted. "What about it?"

"Angel, in his paper, has made the challenge that if we were true psychics in my organization we could predict how well Hector's horse would finish in the race. He did it in a kind of tongue-in-cheek way. But if I could give an accurate prediction of how the race turns out, or even how Hector's horse will finish, I could shut him up. The largest percentage of my callers are female, but nearly half of my viewers are male. And a large segment of the Cuban population in Miami follows thoroughbred racing. It would be a stunning victory."

"You still haven't said what you expect me to do."

She dug a newspaper clipping from her purse. "I found your name in this news clipping . . ." she laid the clipping on the desk " . . . how

you helped solve a murder case involving a man found dead at Hialeah. I made some discreet inquiries. All the reports on you were good." Her manner had turned sweet—almost syrupy. "You are connected to the racetracks somehow," she continued. "And, as a private detective, you are required to maintain confidentiality."

"You want me to handicap the race for you," I said, using my psychic powers.

"Handicap?"

"Tell you the outcome of the race before it's run," I explained.

"Precisely! Can you do that?"

"No. I can't do that," I told her. And I couldn't explain to her that the thousands of variables that need sifting in the process of choosing one horse over another in any given race is a process best learned over many years, costing thousands in lost dollars—not something to be spelled out quickly to a young lady understanding the word handicap to imply somebody with a gimpy leg.

"Can you do *anything*?" The sweetness in her voice was giving way to desperation.

"Sure. I can do something. I can poke around in the backstretch and try to get a line on the entries. I can get you a consensus from some of the top handicappers—but no guarantees."

"Today is Wednesday," she said. "I have a show this afternoon at six. Could you give me something to say for this afternoon's program? The race is Saturday. If I could have something to report on the race today and Thursday evening, with a buildup for Friday evening, the day

before the race—that would work fine.”

“I’ll see what I can find out for you. Two fifty a day plus expenses.”

She gave me five hundred up front and a number where she could be reached. She indicated that if she was successful, there would be a substantial bonus.

According to Princess Rolanda, Angel had not even mentioned the name of the big race in his editorial. The first order of business, as I saw it, was to get a line on the race. The entries for Saturday’s races would not be published in the *Form* until late Thursday night. Calder runs at least one stakes race on Saturday. This Saturday was a big one, the two hundred thousand dollar Calder Oaks—a mile and an eighth on the turf for three-year-old fillies. I silently hoped that Hector didn’t have his horse in the Oaks—that might be a tough one. With luck, Angel was talking about another big race—they run some pretty rich allowance races on Saturday.

The Oaks had not been closed to entries yet, but I got a list of those horses already entered. It would be unusual to get any more entries at such a late date. The race was already full. Fourteen horses were entered. Two would end up on the also-eligible list and probably would not start unless one of the other entrants decided to scratch.

Real Go Getter was a dark bay or brown filly trained by Hector Rivera and was entered to go in the Oaks on Saturday. Post positions for the race were yet to be selected. That would happen sometime today.

Knowing post positions before

their publication might be useful information for Rolanda to have. They wouldn’t be published until tomorrow night. Post positions were chosen by the selection of a numbered pea. The information should be easy to obtain. Any of the other trainers in the race, present at the drawing, would know Real Go Getter’s post draw. Evan Marshall had a filly entered. I’d done some work for him in the past.

I went over to see Evan with my request. He told me to come back in the afternoon, after the drawing. So far, so good. The real problem remained. How do you predict the winner of any race or, just as tough, how any given entry will finish up? Well, of course, that’s what it’s all about. Isn’t it?

Eighty percent of horseplayers end up losers overall. Ten percent end up modest winners overall, but mostly trading dollars. Six percent could make a living at it, winning frequently enough to avoid joining the beleaguered working public, if they wished. Three percent do extremely well. And, for one percent of horseplayers, it’s a high paying industry with dealings in cash, no employees, and few or no taxes. Losing is never a consideration. Maximizing profits and selecting investments for the portfolio are primary concerns. There was only one of the one percenters working Calder that I knew of.

Knowledge is power in all endeavors. If you know more than those who make the odds, knowledge is power squared. The In The Bag Boyd group had that kind of power.

Boyd operated one of the best bet-

ting groups in the country. He based his operations at Calder but had a line on, and bet, almost every track operating in the continental United States.

There are as many different handicapping methods as there are players attending the races. The angles range from betting gray horses on the turf to highly specialized time and distance charts. For professionals like In The Bag Boyd and company, several of the main handicapping disciplines were joined, and there was also an abiding consideration for all contributing variables.

There were four in the group including Boyd. Boyd himself was big on pace and money management; it was his area of expertise. Another of the group handled class and race selection. Another was a trip handicapper and used speed numbers. And the final member took care of the intangibles: post positions, the predicted weather and track condition, jockey-trainer combinations, workouts, et cetera. Each took from the group the knowledge of the others, sharing information and profits.

If I was to get a line on the Calder Oaks, In The Bag Boyd was the guy to talk to. Unfortunately, Boyd was never keen on sharing the least tidbit with an outsider. But it was worth a shot.

In The Bag and his group owned several excellent racehorses, which they raced under the name of Penniless Racing Stable—a total misnomer. The clubhouse owner's box for Penniless was resplendent with a small TV for simulcasts and notebooks piled high amidst binoculars

and other racing and stock market-related documents. I didn't expect to be received graciously but forged ahead anyway in desperation. Imagine my surprise when In The Bag took his cellular phone from his ear and leaped from his chair to greet me.

"Joe Standard!" he shouted. "You must be psychic. I was just gonna call you. Look—I got the phone in my hand. . . . Damn, that's scary. What the hell you doing here anyway?"

"I need to get a line on the Oaks," I admitted.

One of the group riffling through the notebooks offered his take on my inquiry. "Your timing ain't worth a damn," he noted.

"I could come back . . ." I volunteered.

"No, that ain't what he meant," In The Bag said. He told the notebook shuffler to scout out the paddock, the horseshoe board, and the equipment changes on the upcoming races.

Boyd was a thin little guy. He spoke quickly and moved quickly. When the notebook shuffler had departed, In The Bag offered me a seat.

"Somebody broke into my apartment last night," Boyd told me. "They cleaned me out—television sets, VCR, stereo, and my computer. I don't care about that other junk, but my computer's got all the handicapping data, and I don't have any recent backups. That's why Rudy was goin' through the notebooks—all the trip information is lost. We had it listed by race and by horse and by date—all gone. All the

BRIS numbers—the stored class evaluations—everything . . . we're out of business without that computer. I got kind of lax—all the backups are more than a month old—worthless." He twisted his hands nervously. "You get that computer back for me and I'll tell you the last time each trainer in the Oaks bet on their own horse and what their groom had for breakfast."

"How can I identify your computer?" I asked.

"It was a Compaq, a new one—there's a pink flamingo stuck on the side of the tower. My girlfriend stuck it on there," he explained quickly when I shot him a glance. His attention then turned to the horses for the fourth race as they slowly ambled to the starting gate. "We got anything in this race, Al?" he asked a portly fellow next to him.

"The six horse, Dragon Breath, keyed on the field," Al reported.

Dragon Breath was five to two on the toteboard. *No good things will happen for him.* That's what Princess Rolanda said about Dragon Breath.

"Let's pass on the race," said In The Bag. "Ned sez the horse's got sesamoid problems, and the trainer drinks."

Dragon Breath broke on top. He opened a commanding lead into the stretch. Thirty yards from a sure win, his right foreleg snapped, and he slammed headlong onto the track, pitching the jockey forward.

They hauled Dragon Breath onto a wagon and drew forth the cover. The break was severe. Dragon Breath would be put down. *This horse will not win. There is a dark-*

ness on him. No good things will happen for him. So said Princess Rolanda. And so it was. Perhaps I had underestimated this psychic ability stuff.

In The Bag did tell me one more thing I could use. There was a storm front moving in from the west. The prediction was that it would arrive over Florida Friday night. It was a big front and wouldn't clear until late Saturday. That meant rain. The Oaks would most likely be taken off the grass and run on the main track. If that were to happen, many entries would be dropping out.

I stopped to see Evan Marshall about the post position for Real Go Getter before leaving the track. Hector Rivera's horse would break from post number five.

I went back to the office and made a call to Princess Rolanda. I reported to her that the race was the Calder Oaks; told her Hector's horse's name and that the filly would be assigned post position five; that the field would be shorter because of expected rain on Saturday and that there could possibly be a change from the turf course to the main track. She seemed joyful to receive this information. I was a bit curious as to how she might use what I told her in the broadcast.

I decided to stop by the Surfer's Bar and Grill around the corner from my office. I got there just before six. I asked Enrique, the bartender, to put on Channel 61 and gave him a fiver to translate for me. Midway through her half hour, the camera moved in for a closeup of that gorgeous face. She assumed a serious demeanor. First she de-

scribed in some detail the assault on her by Rivera. Then she mentioned the challenge that he had supposedly put forth "in an attempt to ridicule and belittle our invaluable service to you, our listeners." She paused dramatically. Then, as the camera moved even closer, "Let him be warned that I accept his challenge. I *will* predict the fate of his father's horse in the race Saturday." She closed her eyes and put her long red nails to her temple. "I can tell you this now . . . the name of the race is the Calder Oaks . . . Mr. Rivera's horse will be in post number . . . number four—no, wait—number five. And the horse is a girl horse . . . her name . . . her name is Really Go Get It . . . no, that's not quite right. It's Really Go something. I also get the impression that the race will not develop as planned—some change will be made . . . That's all I get right now. Tomorrow evening I will attempt to delve deeper into this prediction."

Soon after, they began to get in to a caller's past lives. I gave Enrique the high sign to flip the channel.

Calamity transpired the following day. The Miami *Tribune* picked up the story from Rolanda's program. On page 2A the headline read: PSYCHIC TO PREDICT HORSE-RACE. Details of the ongoing feud between Princess Rolanda and Angel Rivera were divulged. Excerpts from her broadcast were selectively reproduced for public scrutiny. I began to develop a cold spot in the pit of my stomach.

I got a call from Rolanda just after ten A.M. She advised me that re-

porters from CBN cable had requested an interview. Also, several of the big networks wanted to take her show national for her final prediction. She pleaded with me desperately for more information. It was, as she put it, her chance of a lifetime. Money, she insisted, was no object.

In my experience, money has always been an object—if not of pursuit, then of adoration. Didn't matter. I had nowhere to go without In The Bag and the boys, and they were already nowhere without the flamingo computer.

I maintain a 1965 chartreuse Mustang convertible as a company car. I pitched my empty Styrofoam coffee cup onto the back seat floorboards along with the others, wheeled the Mustang out of the parking lot, and nosed her toward Cooper City.

In The Bag Boyd didn't live in Cooper City, but he lived close. The Grinner lived in Cooper City, and Black Norman dwelt not far away. They were both in the same business. The Grinner was Alex Biddleman, owner of Biddleman Discount Pawn and Check Cashing. Biddleman had some sort of nerve disorder—he grinned all the time; an affliction that aided in his business transactions. Tenacious grinning tended to make lowlifes edgy and impatient while haggling over the price of a stolen camcorder. Most of the punk thieves in the area got used to The Grinner after a few dealings.

I offered The Grinner two hundred for the computer, or twenty if he could tell me where to find it. He

grinned, reached for the twenty, and said, "Try Norman."

I jerked the twenty back at the last minute, grinning back. "I was goin' there next anyway. Don't take any wooden Nikons, Alex."

Black Norman didn't bother with a pawnshop front or any such window dressing follieswaddles. He rented a ten thousand square foot warehouse with a plush office. Norman was more of a truckload dealer—not really a nickel-and-dimer like The Grinner. But he did keep several shelves full of goodies for the occasional walk-in trade.

"'Ey, mahn . . . be long time no see you." Norman was Jamaican. When I listened to him speak, I always half expected him to burst in to "Daaaaaahyoo . . . Daylight come and me wan' go home."

"What you wan' here, mahn?" he asked.

I explained to him my quest for the flamingo computer.

Norman showed me his ultra white Jamaican choppers. "'Ey, mahn, what I be wantin' wid a flamingo computeer?" I showed him the twenty dollar bill. He snatched it before it unfolded in my hand. "Dey be tree of dim. Coco heads."

Norman explained, in his delightful way, that he had done business with them from time to time. He had purchased the VCR but passed on the flamingo computer and the other stuff. Norman described the three and told me where to look. "Careful, mahn, dey be bahd boys," he added.

According to Norman, the name on the apartment was Doyle Trout. The annoying thud, thud, thud of

bass speakers commenced to vibrate the Mustang when I pulled up to the place. A screeching, deafening racket currently classified as music in brain function-impaired circles assaulted me as I got out of the car.

Apparently the other half of the duplex apartment had been abandoned for some time. The windows were busted out, and there was a beer can stuck on the doorknob. The door to the Doyle Trout side of the duplex stood wide open. I went in.

All three were there. Two were jerking and gyrating to the noise from a major size boombox that sat on the windowsill. The other one sat slack-jawed and vacant-eyed on a seedy couch. There was enough stolen merchandise in the tiny living room to finance a congressional race. Most of the items in the room were dancing to the decibel beat of the boombox.

"*You Doyle Trout?*" I shouted at the biggest one, with the crack pipe in his hand.

"*Talk up, Grandpa—I can't hear you!*" he responded.

I drew my nine millimeter Beretta and pumped three quick rounds into the boombox. It exploded with a roaring screech—sort of like the seat of the pants ripping out on a fifty foot giant. "Is that better?" I inquired.

"Cool, man," the kid on the couch muttered.

Crack Pipe's face got red and angry looking. "So, you think you're some kinda tough guy or something?"

"I'm a prospective customer. Are you Doyle Trout?"

"Ain't no Doyle Trout," said the kid. "He's been dead for three years. We just left the name on the mailbox." He moved a step closer and stuck out his hand in my direction. "You're gonna pay for that boom-box, dad—three hundred bucks—hand it over." His dancing friend moved to his side in a menacing fashion.

I let the hammer down on the Beretta with slow deliberation, engaged the safety, and carefully stuffed it back in my belt before responding. "I'm not your dad, you little asswipe. You can steal another radio. Now, you want to make some money, or would you prefer to have me knock out your tooth?"

"You ain't gonna . . ." was as far as he got before the short, sharp left jab splatted on his nose. He reeled back and slammed against the wall.

I locked eyes with his bantam-weight associate. He backed up a step. "You want to reconsider?" I asked. "I'd be willing to pay for what I'm after. But if you insist, I'd just as soon pound the crap out of both of you and take it."

He got to his feet slowly and wiped his bloody nose on his sleeve. "What the hell you want anyway?"

Three hundred got me the CPU with the flamingo on it, a keyboard, a monitor, and an ink jet printer loaded into the back seat of my Mustang.

"They didn't steal the printer," In The Bag advised me as we stood debating which piece of equipment to lift from the back seat and tote into his house.

"So now you got two of them. By

the way, you owe me five hundred bucks."

Once everything was hooked back up, Boyd wrote me a check for a thousand. "A little extra to show my appreciation," he explained. He promised that once he was up and running he would fill me in on the Oaks. He first needed to download the *Form* from the Internet and get his numbers together from his associates.

I made it back to the office before noon, to be greeted by a relentlessly ringing phone.

Princess Rolanda wanted to know why she couldn't reach me and why I was goofing off and not feeding her the information she so desperately required. She was irksome. Before I could point out that she was a psychic and should know what I was up to, she began to bemoan her fate and impart false observations about my general character and lack of parents.

Evidently the magnitude and depth of the hole she had dug for herself had recently become apparent to her. I advised her that the introduction of hysteria into the information gathering phase of our operation was counterproductive. I promised her more information before her six o'clock airing but had not the least clue as to how that might happen. It didn't seem to calm her any. I listened to the phone slam in my ear.

It took scarcely any psychic ability to figure out why she had problems hanging onto boyfriends.

At three P.M. I called In The Bag Boyd on his mobile phone at the track.

"I'm desperate," I told him. "Can you give me anything on the Oaks yet?"

"What the hell's the rush? The race isn't until Saturday," he observed.

I told him that the reasons would take too long to explain but I needed any information he could give me on the Oaks today.

"I have the copy of the entries you gave me," he said. "And we have the capability of building our own performance ratings with just the horse's names. I'll have somebody run your entry names through the system and see what pops out. Call you back in about an hour. 'Course we'll have to run it for the main track *and* the turf course—nobody is sure if it will stay on the weeds or not. And, you understand, this is not exact. It will only allow you to throw out those who appear to have little chance."

"Whatever . . . but particularly I need to know about Hector Rivera's horse, Real Go Getter. Can she win? Or, if not, can you estimate her best possible finish?"

"I'll get back to you," said In The Bag. "Over and out."

He didn't get back to me. Princess Rolanda, however, did get back to me, several times. The woman had the ability to radiate pure venom over the phone line. Little did she realize that I was familiar with almost every Spanish cuss word in current usage. Such words made up the extent of my Spanish vocabulary. She used most of them—on me, on her ex-boyfriend, even on Hector and his filly and some unknown people that she just threw in

for the hell of it once she got started.

Boyd called back just after five P.M. He reported that, turf or main track, Real Go Getter could not finish better than fifth and probably wouldn't even do that well. If the race stayed on the turf, there were four main contenders, one of which would undoubtedly win. A switch to the main track would leave only three of those four contenders, since the fourth was strictly a turf horse and would not be a threat on the main track.

"So who are the main contenders?" I asked.

Boyd read them off: "Morning Miss, Lomand, Sunny Smile, Kalambang—they all got a chance. It's a poor betting race."

I sat back and waited. Sure enough, at five fifteen the phone rang. It was Princess Rolanda.

"Well?" she said

I told her what I had found out from Boyd. Meticulously I spelled out each of the contender's names for her.

"Is that all?" she asked when I had finished.

"'Fraid so."

"Then I will no longer need your services," she said curtly.

"Wait a minute, what about money is no object? What about the handsome bonus if . . ."

She hung up before I finished.

I walked around the block to Surfer's Bar and Grill and nursed a beer until six P.M. Enrique jammed his five dollar tip into his pants pocket and turned to Channel 61. There she was, all sweetness and light.

"Skip all that other crap," I told

Enrique. "Just let me know when she starts on the horserace."

Midway through the program she got to it. Explaining again how the evil Angel Rivera and his sinister publication *Palabra Nueva* had defiled her good name, she then put her lovely hands to her lovely face in deep concentration. "Hector Rivera's horse will run no better than fifth," Enrique translated. "And I'm just beginning to see the winner of the race . . . just can't quite make it out . . . but the winning horse has the letter *M* in its name. More startling revelations will be revealed on tomorrow's program."

Cute trick. All the real contenders I'd given her had an *M* in their names. Enrique listened without speaking for a few seconds.

"Well, what's going on, Enrique? What are they saying?"

"Ahh . . . oh nothin', they're talkin' about this woman who spontaneously combusted in another life."

I decided it was time to stamp the Princess Rolanda case closed. And I couldn't have been happier about it. But I was curious as to what her great Friday night revelation might turn out to be.

Friday afternoon I sat puzzling over the *Racing Form*, attempting to get some juice out of the information received from In The Bag Boyd and friends. Prospective wagering on the Oaks and other selected races at Calder on Saturday seemed to be in order.

Just after four the phone rang. It was Angel Rivera, our beloved Princess Rolanda's ex-beau. He told me he'd had reports from his father's friends in the backstretch

that I'd been nosing around about the race Saturday. His English was good.

"I know you're working for Rolanda," he said. "She may have some dangerous friends, but so do I. You aren't that smart. I know you've been outside watching my office for the last several days. You keep your nose out of my business and end this harassment or I'll have to take action. And you won't like it."

He slammed the phone down before I could get a word out. They truly deserved each other.

I finished working over the *Form* with thorough diligence, closed up shop, and ambled over to Surfer's in time to catch Rolanda's big revelation. Enrique appeared quickly with his hand out. The program was in progress.

I plunked down the fiver. "Anything happen yet?"

"There's this guy who thinks he might have been a rhinoceros in a past life."

"I mean about the race."

He shook his head, listening intently. I reached over and drew myself a draft. "Okay," said Enrique, "here . . ." He began to translate.

"Now, as I promised you," Rolanda began, "the winning horse has an *M* in its name, and Mr. Hector Rivera's horse will not finish better than fifth as I have already stated. What I report tonight grieves me. It is something unrelated to the race that has come to me in a vision. It has to do with Mr. Angel Rivera. *Sadly, there is a darkness on him. No good things will happen for him. Yes, a darkness . . . a great darkness.*" □

FICTION

SPRING RITE

Tom Berdine



Illustration by David Monette

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“Which is even weirder yet,” Gowen said. “But that ain’t the best part.”

At approximately which point, Kramer didn’t want to hear any more. It had been a mistake to let Gowen get started. He went outside into the mild March evening to take a leak and get away from Gowen for a little while before hitting the sack.

“Seriously, I got the skinny on ’em,” Gowen said, unzipping and joining him at the edge of the porch.

“Tell it to someone who gives a good goddamn,” Kramer said.

The elder of the brothers and known his entire adult life simply by his last name, Kramer felled trees for a living, had a nagging pain in his right shoulder, had to get up before dawn, and felt certain the sources of Gowen’s information would turn out to be his stoner drinking buddies down at the Trail’s End Tavern. People from the Community Church used to get on Kramer about Gowen: do this for him, do that for him, this or that *about* or *to* him. Orphaned at age three, with only Kramer left, Gowen had been permitted the discovery of leisure, then self-indulgence, inevitably rebellion, and on down the line to a number of vices including drug use and actual dope peddling.

Kramer accepted that he had done a poor job with Gowen, who now as an adult in his mid-thirties still brought the law around on occasion and still had that tendency to get mixed up in things that were none of his business. Mr. Town Gossip was one of Kramer’s nicknames for him. Arguably a clearer infraction of the social code than even dope peddling in a neighborhood of millions of trees and few people, most of whom, even the straight ones, did something a little illegal from time to time, poached a deer or an elk, a few salmon, a load of firewood out of the state forest. Gossip had from homesteader times actually gotten people killed. Gowen, never one to back off an argument, purported to have read a magazine article somewhere that said that scientific research showed gossip was seventy-five percent accurate.

“Amazing stuff happens right under your nose, Kramer.”

“Gowen . . .” Kramer used the parental voice on him, and they were quiet for a time. A lone housedog harooed somewhere in the distance.

“There’s Wes Greenly’s dog. Figures. Word is that Wes is going in with them.”

This was standard Gowen. Kramer was supposed to ask, going in with *who* on *what*? At minimum, experience in that country should have led to a circumspect attitude as to who was doing what and with whom, and even more generally what was coming from where. Sense of direction itself was confounded there. Rescuing hunters who got themselves lost in the twists and turns of river and ridge was a local industry. A compass was useless because of the iron in the hills, and with the unpredictable airs that ran upstream and down over the surface of the Neslolo River, the suddenly uprising mists, downrolling fogs, and vari-

ous other phenomena of distinctly odd and possibly magical nature depending upon your point of view and maybe level of intelligence, the local acoustics fooled even the natives. It was Gowen, for that matter, who was always yacking it up, by way of proving any number of different points, about how Mount St. Helens had blown her stack right on the eastern horizon and nobody there had heard a pop. It had been Gowen, just the previous spring, who had found Jake Armbrister in the river dead of hypothermia, pinned in the current by the limbs of a snag but with his head above water so that obviously he had screamed his lungs out in the hour or so before all his heat was gone, screamed and screamed but was unheard by his wife at home fifty yards away and for that matter by the Kramer brothers upriver a quarter of a mile, who on any number of occasions had been able to hear the Armbrister family in normal conversation in their yard, sometimes been able to pick out several words.

The residents of the Neslolo Valley, in neighborhoods strung on the meandering river like beads on a snarled string, were alternately clustered together on benches of usable land and distanced from one another by passages of rapids and riffles. The fifty-three acres that were left of the original Kramer homestead were alone on the north bank of Kramer's Bend, a stretch of deep water that lazied westerly in a nearly hundred and eighty degree arc from the riffle beneath the Hinsvaark Bridge to a twisting, north-northwesterly slide of whitewater, along which no one could live, until the now-deserted Armbrister place. Neither could anyone live in the patchwork of Crown Corporation forest and clearcut directly across from the Kramers on the north side of Long Andrew Ridge.

There were two homesteads on the flat bench of the upriver shoulder of Kramer's Bend: Jensen's, currently being rented by a gang of Mexican treeplanters, and Old Frick's. The raucous music the Mexicans played during their Saturday all-day parties sometimes sounded like it was right outside the Kramers' kitchen window, while at other times it either seemed to be coming from the Armbrister place, in completely the wrong direction, or else was not heard at all unless the Kramers came out their front door and walked up to the Hinsvaark Bridge, where it was like the Spanish language MTV they could get on the satellite dish but turned all the way up to ten. The Frick place was actually closer than Jensen's, but seldom was anything at all heard from that quarter. When Kramer as a kid had cut hay for Young Frick, his mother had been able to call him home to supper with a just-barely-raised voice as she stood on their back porch, yet he could shout and shout his return to her and not be heard.

Old Frick's, as they still called it, was located in a natural cul-de-sac which Old Frick and then Young Frick had knocked themselves out farming or ranching or whatever they could do to make a buck, and

which a succession of renters had also failed to turn into anything. The last renters at Old Frick's had installed professional-looking chainlink kennels for raising Afghan hounds. Now these new people kept wolves.

It was the new renters at Old Frick's, in fact, who were the object of Gowen's current preoccupation. Watching the wolves pace back and forth in the Afghan hound kennel and listening to them being harassed by the neighborhood coyotes night after night, the Kramer brothers had at first found themselves in an unusual state of agreement. Neither of them would have admitted to any romantic notions about the forest that surrounded them or the creatures therein, which as a matter of fact had not included any freeranging wolves for at least a generation, but the penning up of such creatures was, in Gowen's word, "weird." The brothers had assumed that the new neighbors were the source of the flyers taped to the Vildefeld store window advertising WOLF AND WOLF-X PUPPIES FOR SALE, but then Gowen, Mr. Town Gossip, learned that the wolf-puppy seller was someone else entirely. The new neighbors weren't selling, just keeping, which was even weirder yet.

Beyond which Kramer was unwilling to listen. He had been down this road with Gowen too many times. He took a deep breath and let it out through his nose.

"You don't know whose dog that is, Gowen. The only way we know for certain where those goddamn wolves are is we can see 'em in the binocs. Jesus Christ."

"If it ain't Wes's dog, then whose dog is it?"

"Oh ja," Kramer said, imitating the great-grandfather he had known but Gowen had not. He zipped up and turned away.

Suddenly from the bottom of the yard their own dog, Bucket, started up. They both shushed him immediately. This was how it started every evening now. First one dog, then another, then the coyotes, and then the goddamn wolves.

"I'm going to bed now, Gow."

"I got the information on 'em," Gowen said again.

A single coyote sent a long wail out from some hillside—they could not have said which—and was answered from somewhere lower down, closer, possibly on their side of the river. Quickly more coyotes chimed in, followed by Bucket, unable finally to restrain himself. They let him go. Soon Bucket and the other dog dropped out, so that it was only pure coyote singing. The song rose to fill the entire bowl of the valley, transforming itself, as they listened, to a kind of wild laughter. Kramer was just opening the back door when the wolves joined in. Half-in, half-out of the doorway, he paused for that interval, now familiar, of uncertain duration but predictable conclusion, in which at some undetectable-to-human-ears cue the coyotes stopped suddenly, all together on a single beat, leaving the wolves to continue solo, forlorn, and ridiculous in their cages.

"Same coyote practical joke, night after night," Kramer said. "Why do you think they do that?"

"I know for a fact the wolf guy's running a meth lab up there, right up there by Old Frick's Spring, right there by that big maple, remember. Remember that big maple? Thirty-five foot trailer. Can't see it, but it's there. Fishburn or Fishback or Fishman, some goddamn thing like that, something with fish in it. Keeps a few cows so he can pretend he's doing something over there, and the wolves so people'll think he's real bad. Lives with some kind of child prostitute or sex abuse victim or something."

It was Kramer, not Gowen the ladies' man, who saw the Fisher woman first. He wouldn't have said she was a woman really but a girl, and with her short hair Kramer thought at first she was a boy, fourteen or so, soaked to the skin and white with chill, drying off in front of Wes Greenly's stove. But then she had looked back at him and arched her spine to the heat.

It automatically put Kramer one up, and the first half-thought that went through his head was, wait till I tell Gowen.

Lately, with the national forests closing up because of the spotted owl and all the environmental laws, and sawmills shutting down all over the country, the valley was full of women and children who had been deserted by their men. The Kramer family had the opposite problem: three generations of women had run off. Kramer alone, having never actually had a woman, had avoided this rite of passage. Gowen had been married, if only briefly, ten years before and had subsequently had a string of girlfriends, but since the wife he hadn't brought any of his women home and Kramer didn't know any of them, although he might know their fathers or their brothers or their estranged spouses.

Kramer didn't really know any single women, at least none that he thought of as such. He had missed out on the few schoolgirls of his youth, eight total in the sophomore class he had dropped out of at age sixteen to go to work in the woods, and as the years had gone by, there had been only a few widows or castoffs with children who had caught his eye. But he'd had enough of child-rearing with raising Gowen from age three, himself barely more than a child at the time.

Kramer's temperament was anyway a more or less direct shot from the great-grandparents, sawed-off Germans who'd migrated from Schleswig-Holstein in the 1870's, tough squareheads who had ruined their oxen dragging cuckoo clocks and carved bedsteads over the shoulder of Nicolai Mountain to that bench of sandy loam created and perennially reclaimed by an obscure, crazy river the Indians avoided and called Neslolo. Whereas Gowen apparently could not have cared less about all that had been accomplished by that and two subsequent generations, Kramer had paid the taxes, repaired the fences, preserved Great-grand-

mother Grace's diary in German—only a few words of which could he translate—and her German Bible, and all manner of yellowed licenses, bills of lading, deeds, newspaper articles especially from the bootleg days, receipts for Roebuck shoes, seed corn, kegs of nails, lumber for barns and outbuildings long since washed down the Neslolo, and women's clothing in surprising quantity—they had all left in a hurry—some of which over the years had been transformed into unlikely school shirts, trousers, pajamas, work coats, and grease rags, while others, the very feminine items, rested in obscure crannies and boxes and on mute hangers pressed to the backs of closets.

Kramer had been nine and was still called Albert and Gowen was only just about to be born when Great-grandpa Jan, Old Kramer, more than one hundred years old and bent over like a horsecollar from osteoporosis yet still trundling baby-loads of firewood around the yard in his little wheelbarrow, had finally toppled over head-first directly into the wheelbarrow and died curled up like a tire standing on its tread. Within the family Old Kramer's demented belief that his wife would imminently be returning from Astoria—where she had gone fifty or so years before with money to pay their back taxes and instead had hopped a steamer for San Francisco—had become the butt of dark humor the point of which had not revealed itself to child Albert until that moment of looking down into the pale blue, dead eyes still open to the sky between the old man's legs. *Aha!*: you don't live forever. Albert in turn had been discovered standing over the dead old man by Grandma Elise. When he said to her, showing off his new insight, "He's still waiting for Grandma Grace to come back!" she had slapped him full across the ear and yarded him all the way back to the house by his hair.

This bellringing Kramer had retained as one of very few memories of the paternal grandmother, who a year later, subsequent to Grandpa Walter's stroke and drowning in the river along with his D-10 Cat, had departed for California just as her mother-in-law had done. Of Grace, however, there were many almost-memories, vivid swatches of reminiscence from Old Kramer, who could and did read her diary out loud, of rounding the Horn in steerage, fending off the rats with her good silver soup ladle and the terrible thirst by drinking her baby's urine, of the panther crouching in the soft mud of the new road as she rode her white pony to Vildefeld. As to reasons Grace may have had for deserting husband and child there was nothing—since she was perpetually, hah!, coming right back—just as there was not a word, not of protest or even of surprise, when Grandma Elise left. Similarly, when Kramer and Gowen's mother, Jenny Bergersen Kramer, hit the road with a truckdriver in Kramer's thirteenth year and Gowen's third, there was no explanation offered and, with Frank Kramer into the bottle big-time then, none sought. When, all in that same year, Frank died right in front of the house in the path of a log truck, Uncle Curley was killed in the woods, and Aun-

ty Gert had gotten "the hell out of here, boys!" the same day the insurance check arrived, that was it, the men were dead and the women had split.

The last female in the family hadn't even been properly in the family. Gowen had brought a bride home from the university where he had gone for a year on his G.I. benefits. She was an artist, the real thing, a painter in oils and watercolors who said the Neslolo was the most beautiful place she had ever seen. She had arrived in spring. Then winter and rain and darkness. Kramer had listened to her slow, cigarette-smoking footsteps go room to room, window to window in the wornout homestead house that rocked on its poles when the wind came up and had never quite come up with anything in particular to say to her. Yet he had understood the problem long before the groom. Women hated rain. They needed sun. They were something like tomatoes, which refused to ripen in that country because the nighttime temperatures were so seldom above fifty-five degrees. They craved the company of other women, which otherwise was a good thing, for where there was one there might come others.

Kramer, notorious tightwad that he was, had sprung for a new TV and satellite dish. But around Christmas she had split anyway, leaving half her stuff behind. Kramer hadn't understood why Gowen hadn't gone after her. He briefly considered it himself, but then what would he have said to her when he caught up with her? Kramer sensed without being able to put words to it that he had come to count on the status that went with having a beautiful young woman in the house. And by inertia of some obscure illogic he had come to believe that he too would soon find a wife. And now he had lived like a maiden aunt with his brother for an additional decade and the same logic dictated that the bride's name never be spoken.

It was a Saturday in April. Spring had turned around to play with winter, dumping pea-sized hail and cold rain here and there while up the road a warm sun was shining. It was raining where Kramer turned off the highway onto the rocky mainline that led through a second-growth fir plantation to Wes Greenly's driveway. There was an easterly wind, so it would be colder up high where Barber Logging Company's timber show was. Kramer pictured himself working Monday in wet snow. Maybe Barber would call a day off. How would he spend a day off? Wiping Gowen's butt, he thought. That's how I spend my time.

A week earlier Gowen had come back from steelhead fishing in a state of rage. The new neighbor with the wolves had run him off the north bank of the river with a shotgun. Kramer could see Gowen's argument—they had fished there their whole lives—but at some point Gowen just had to cool down. After all, the wolf guy was paying rent over there. Plus, without any doubt whatsoever, Gowen had been guilty of snooping around.

Kramer had followed Gowen as he went kicking and thrashing his way through the house and had nearly come to blows with him getting his pistol away from him. Kramer had locked up all the guns then, and Gowen, in the grand finale of his tantrum, had packed up and trekked over to the framed tent he kept on Long Andrew Ridge for tending his pot plantation. Kramer had spotted him up there in his binoculars the night before, his shadow sitting still on the surface of the tent for as long as Kramer watched. Old Frick's house was on the same ridge as the tent, about three-quarters of a mile away overland, and Old Frick's Spring was even closer, east and downhill, half a mile at most. Kramer had caught himself hoping the law would somehow get wind of what was going on, whatever it was that was going on. Kramer himself could never call the cops, but maybe somebody would.

Countering the steep slant of Wes Greenly's driveway, Kramer shoved his rear end into the back of the pickup's seat and feathered the brakes over the deeply potted track. The rain slacked off, and momentarily a sunbreak swept across the clearcut around him. It was not often he went to Wes and Jeanellen's these days, although he and Wes went back a ways and they still worked for the same gyppo outfit. More or less worked, since lately Wes hadn't even shown up on the landing half the time, and usually when he did at least one guy on the crew wanted to kick his ass for something stupid he had done or said.

About two years ago Wes had gotten into the dope-growing business just like Gowen, although they didn't seem to have much to do with each other. Barber had begun hassling Kramer because it was Kramer who had vouched for Wes way back when. "Go down and find out does he want the goddamn job or not!" It had already occurred to Kramer that Wes was the one to talk to anyway. Now he had a good excuse. Who else to ask about a doper but another doper? At least Wes was a doper he knew. He needed to talk to somebody. He sure as hell couldn't talk to Gowen.

Kramer went under big timber and descended through the cavernous space beneath the heads of the giant white fir and hemlock rooted on the riverbank below. The truck complained as it took the big bounce at the bottom of Wes's driveway and waded into an expanse of tan water that had been left behind by the receding river. Kramer kept his speed up, having negotiated this track many times in high water, until he made the rise that led into the Greenly yard. Jeanellen's milk goats followed him with their slit eyes as he went past and stopped at the laundry shack, where the lights were on.

The sky changed quickly again and dumped a hard shower on him as he got out. He skipped through the mud in front of the laundry shack and banged on the door briefly before letting himself in. Jeanellen was in there with Lydia, her fourteen-year-old daughter from a previous marriage. Jeanellen was feeding dungarees through her old ringer,

which grunted away in the midst of the humming new automatic washer and dryer Wes had bought her with some of his dope money. Lydia was folding.

"Want to borrow my boat?" Kramer said. This was a reliable opener. Careless Wes had lost a succession of boats and canoes to the river, two or three of which had wound up in the Kramer pasture. So the boat joke was always good.

Lydia cut her eyes at her mother. Jeanellen did not look up, merely gave Kramer a brief wave of plump hand that was not particularly hello any more than a gesture toward the rain on the metal roof. As he moved into the warm spot by the trash burner, Kramer thought he detected tears hanging in the corners of Jeanellen's eyes. He made sure not to stare. Women crying was anyway impossible to deal with. If Gowen had been there, Kramer would have done all right playing second fiddle. Gowen would have got her to talk or laugh.

"Your old man down at the house?"

Jeanellen waved again, taking in a larger portion of rain and roof.

"He's there," Lydia spoke up, something in her voice. Kramer went back out into the rain and up the planked path to the porch built onto the front of the trailer. How Wes got away with it he would never understand, keeping a wife and pretty daughter down in this wet hole with hardly any sunlight, unreliable electricity, crappy TV reception, no company. As Kramer went up the steps onto the porch, a shadow passed across the drawn front windowshade. He knocked.

Fifteen seconds passed and he knocked again. Another half minute and he knocked and gave Wes a shout. When Wes answered the door finally, he had a revolver in his hand, halfway hiding it down behind his leg. Wes grinned quickly but didn't step aside to let Kramer in.

"What's up?" Wes asked, giving Kramer the raised eyebrows and shoulders.

"Talk to you."

"About what?"

"What what? You not talking to me now?"

Wes glanced over his shoulder into the trailer's living room and stepped out onto the porch, closing the door behind him.

"Didn't know who it was."

"Who the hell'd you think it was?"

Wes didn't answer, just looked out into the rain in the yard.

"Okay, look, first of all, Barber says if you want your job you better be at work tomorrow and on time. He asked me to come by personally and tell you."

"How come he didn't come himself? You his waterboy now?"

"I also want to talk to you about our new neighbor."

The rain in the yard increased suddenly so that Kramer only heard part of what Wes, turning away from him, said next, only: "... mine! ..."

"You heard about Gowen and our new neighbor?" Kramer persisted. "Fishback or Fishburn or something like that?"

"Yeah. Fisher. Keep your voice down, okay? Yeah, I heard about it."

"Why am I keeping my voice down?"

Wes kept moving away from him and had almost reached the door when Jeanellen came charging down the walkway through the rain bearing a basket of clean laundry. She arrived with a clump on the top porch step, and Wes had to hold the door open for her to avoid getting run over. She went past him and then stuck her head back out and said, "You going to let Kramer stand out in the rain? Come on in, Kramer. Meet your new neighbor."

Wes went in, and Kramer followed. What he took for a young boy in a wet, white shirt arched his back to the heat of the parlor stove and looked back at him, and before Kramer could look away, there was the dark stain of erect nipple beneath the wet cloth and Kramer thought, wait till I tell Gowen.

Wes jerked his head for Kramer to follow and went ahead of him into the kitchen. Jeanellen, puffing over her clothesbasket in the narrow hallway, went away toward the rear bedroom. A coffeepot was perking on the stove, and Wes busied himself.

"Cup, Kramer?"

"No."

Wes went past him back into the living room bearing a steaming mug in two hands. Kramer watched through the doorway as the girl received the mug, her hands on top of Wes's so that the both of them together delivered the first hot sip to her lips. Wes crossed to a shelf and returned with a bottle of whisky, offering to pour a slug of it into her cup. She took the bottle from him and raised it to her lips, her head thrown back and the wet cloth shaping to her arms.

"How'd you get so wet?" Kramer asked from the kitchen, immediately regretting the clumsy sound of his own voice. But neither the girl nor Wes responded.

"Easy, easy!" Wes murmured, pulling the bottle from her mouth so that it made a loud pop.

Kramer came out of the kitchen and went to the front door and said, "Wes?" He waited until Wes started coming along after him, then went onto the porch to the far end where firewood was stacked.

"That right, what Jeanellen said? That the wolf guy's woman?"

Wes's mouth screwed up. "They're not married or anything."

"What's the story on the guy?"

"Fisher is somebody you ought to avoid, Kramer. Something you definitely need to keep your nose out of. Yours and your wacko brother's."

"Weird," Kramer found himself saying, one of Gowen's words that he himself never used. Wes looked at Kramer intently for several seconds and then smiled.

"What's she doing here?" Kramer asked.

"Visiting. Likes a little female company."

"She walk here?"

Jeanellen's voice inside and then Jeanellen at the door, her arms akimbo holding up her big breasts. "Kramer, you give this girl a ride home? She lives down there by you."

Wes turned quickly on his heel. A moment passed between husband and wife.

"Come on out, girl, what'd you say your name was, come on out here. This man's going to take you home. Whyn't you change into those things I give you?" Jeanellen went inside briefly and reemerged with the girl, ushering her with pushy bustle onto the porch.

The Fisher woman made no move to don the flannel workshirt Jeanellen draped across her shoulders. Instead she descended without a word into the rain and started up the slope of the yard on the plank walkway. Wes leaned after her. Jeanellen took a single step forward and said, "Kramer?"

The Fisher woman was waiting for him, staring out the truck's side window into the rain. She didn't turn to him as he got in and started the engine. Lydia was watching from the laundry shack door, arms akimbo like her mother's. Kramer backed and turned the truck around in the narrow driveway. They had started forward and Kramer had put it quickly into second gear for the descent into the standing water when a sudden, dull impact just behind his ear startled him. A mud clot stuck momentarily to the truck's rear window and slid downward, its juice spreading across the expanse of glass. He opened the door and looked back to see Lydia fleeing through the yard. He had thought Lydia liked him. He closed up again and went on.

Momentum was required to make it back up Wes's driveway in the muddy conditions, and Kramer kept his eyes ahead all the way up to the mainline. The percussive racket of the truck's progress over the freshly laid pit-run on the mainline filled the silence in the cab as they wound toward the highway. At the stop sign where the mainline intersected the highway he had an excuse to look over. Her face beneath the cap of black hair was very pale. She looked like no one in particular, no one else he knew, like neither boy nor girl and certainly not like a woman except for the fullness of the lower lip and the steadiness of the small-black eyes that turned then and studied him in return.

Pretending he had merely been watching for oncoming traffic, Kramer started again and accelerated. They coasted down the long, curving ribbon of asphalt toward the bottom. He kept his eyes on the road as she moved in the seat beside him, drawing the wet shirt over her head, her small yam-shaped breasts jiggling into the light before he could catch himself. She regarded him steadily as she put one arm into the sleeve of Wes Greenly's shirt, drew the body of fresh flannel around

behind her bare torso, captured the other sleeve, and, not hurrying the dark tips under cover until he had looked and looked away again, slowly buttoned.

"Here," she said at the juncture of Long Andrew Road. She got out and was turning back toward him as she closed the truck door, a moment in which a person ordinarily would have thanked another person for a ride. But she didn't say it, and so he did: "Thanks."

The crookedness of her teeth surprised him. "For what?" she asked, and laughed. "Letting you look at my tits?" And laughed again, her eyes looking straight into his, and then turned away up Long Andrew, her small haunches alternating. He sat in his truck as she went under the white trunks of the alders growing along the road, following the curve of the river out of sight.

Sunday night the jetstream shrugged, and before dawn a spring snow-storm descended upon the Neslolo Valley. Barber called at five and canceled work. The smell of the snow was overpowering as Kramer lugged firewood from the stack beside the house. About nine A.M. the electricity went out. He called the power company and got a recorded message. Kramer fed the dog, who gyrated and leaped in ecstasy over the snow.

"Yeah, Bucket! You like this stuff, don't you?" His voice sounded louder than normal in the dense air of the near whiteout. It occurred to him that it was possible—no, probable—that the Fisher woman could hear him from across the river. This notion held him in place as if it were novel. Bucket stared eagerly into his eyes as snowflakes accumulated in his hair and on his face. But then, what could he say that would be of interest to her?

He went inside and paced the noisy floor and looked out the window into the cascading white curtain. He built up the stove in the front room and took off his shoes. He prepared an elaborate lunch of instant soup fortified with ground elk. When he realized he had set the table for two, a sudden depression overtook him.

There were places in the cellar where Gowen sometimes hid whisky. Kramer was able to locate only an empty Jim Beam bottle nestled against a plastic zip-lock Baggie of pot. This he automatically seized and carried upstairs to be consigned to the woodstove.

He crouched before the cast-iron door of the stove and squeezed the pillow of dried leaves in his fist, inexplicably raising it to his nostrils before throwing it into the fire. He took the extra bowl and spoon from the table to the sink as if they needed washing. He ate his solitary soup and sat over the empty bowl looking out the back window at the snow. The light flattened, and the stove burned down. At dusk the snow ceased. He took down the binoculars from their peg beside the kitchen door and examined one by one the opaque, lit windows of Old Frick's house. The wolves rose occasionally and shook snow from their fur. Gowen's tent

was a just barely visible oddity among the stumps and white-draped brush halfway up on the ridge. Darkness fell, and the tent's canvas sides remained unlit. He let the house become dark. When the moon shone briefly through the traveling clouds, his breath became visible. It startled him slightly to see his breath inside the house, and he laughed out loud. He built the stove fire back up and warmed the leftover soup and started the generator so he could watch TV. He was channel surfing when the muffled racket of a pickup truck plowing into the drift at the head of the driveway announced Gowen's return.

Kramer turned the front porch light on and went out. A few snowflakes filtered out of the black sky. Gowen whooped as he came down the yard kicking glittering spray ahead of him.

"You smell like a gin mill."

"Nobody says that any more, Kramer. People used to say that when there used to be gin mills. There are no gin mills any more, Kramer. Say something else."

"You get tired of spying on Mr. Fisher?"

"Ah, the lofty Kramer descends . . . very good, bro. What's new? What's going on in the world, such as you know it?"

"You talk first, then I'll decide what I want to say to you."

Kramer followed Gowen inside and watched him disrobe in the heat of the stove. He regarded his brother's bare limbs, remembering when he had been able to pick Gowen up into his arms effortlessly.

"So talk. What's Mr. Wolf-man doing up there? I know you been sneaking around peekin' in his window."

"He's making meth. Just like I told you. A sad tale but true."

"What is that, meth?"

"Methamphetamine. Yes indeed. You take it, fifteen minutes later you want more. Ask your buddy Wes, he knows all about it."

"I just saw Wes yesterday."

"You talked to Wes? My, my, you do get around. And he told you what?"

"Nothing really. He seemed to think your Mr. Fisher was a dangerous individual."

"I worry about you, man. Stuff happens right under your nose. You talk to Jeanellen? What'd she have to say for herself?"

"Nothing. Seemed a little out of sorts."

"Yeah, I'll say. She and Wes are splitting."

"Bull! That's bull!"

"Not according to my source of information."

"One of your little dope customers gossiping with some other little degenerate, one little degenerate to another."

"That's right. One of my little dope customers is real tight with sweet young Lydia, and he says that she says that mommy and daddy are splittin' the sheets. That was this afternoon, so it's as we speak, if you know what I mean."

"Gossip!"

"Eighty-five percent, Krame. Local gossip, it's even higher."

"I was just up there yesterday, and Jeanellen and Lydia were doing laundry."

"Doing laundry, oh . . . well . . ."

"Bull!"

"It was Lydia caught him."

"Him who? Caught what?"

"Caught Wes, in delecto el flagrante, as they say, doing the nacky with Mr. Wolf-man Fisher's little meth whore. Ah, the neighborhood is going to the dogs, er, wolves, 'scuse me."

"Bull! That's bull!"

"Crazy bitch walks around in the woods in the rain. Looney Tunes. Brain's cooked. You see her while you were up there? Must have just missed her. Too bad. You could have given her a lift. I hear she trades sex for transportation."

Kramer had made no decision not to tell. He had merely hesitated, and hesitation had shaped itself into a small lie of omission, and by the end of *The Late Show* he was schooling himself to think about the Fisher woman only out of Gowen's presence lest his brother pluck the secret from his mind.

In bed for his go-to-sleep dream Kramer constructed his next meeting with the Fisher woman. He came across her in the rain in the woods. He came across her walking down the road in the snow. She was walking down the road in the snow having just come out of the woods. He said . . . , and then she said, I require methamphetamine, I require it every fifteen minutes.

He awoke at his usual time in the predawn and built up the fire. Barber telephoned. A warm rain had started, pushed by a Chinook wind. He and Gowen watched television all day. The brown surface of the river became visible as it filled its ravine. He almost told Gowen about the Fisher woman at supper, but then simply did not. Barber called again during the evening news and said they would try to get something done the next day. "Call your friend, will you?"

"Call him yourself. I ain't your waterboy."

Wes was not there on the landing in the morning. Kramer lost himself in the work of felling second-growth fir into the pulpy snow on Greasy Spoon Ridge.

"I thought he was a friend of yours!" Barber yelled at him over the noise of their saws. Kramer took himself away from the others during lunchbreak. On the way home he tried and failed to imagine the Fisher woman in the cab of his truck, trading sex for transportation. What was a meth whore? He looked for her along the road and in the trees going past. He pictured Wes holding the steaming mug to her lips.

He came close to telling Gowen about her that night as they orbited around one another in the house before dinner. It was Gowen's turn to cook, and he was ransacking the cupboard for something that did not require complicated preparation.

"You're making a goddamn mess!" Kramer shouted at him.

"The hell's the matter with you?"

Another windstorm came up in the early evening, and again the dogs and coyotes and wolves were quiet all night. Again Wes was not at work. Barber was in a state. Kramer yelled back at him. "He don't belong to me! Go see him yourself!"

Barber let him alone until quitting time. As they were getting into the crummy for the ride down to the landing, Barber asked him to bring two cases of dynamite up with him the next morning. Kramer, of them all the fundamentally sound man and reliable worker, had been Barber's keeper of explosives for years.

"Might as well build road until we can find us a new choker man," Barber said pointedly. "We ain't gonna get any timber moved, seein' as your great friend is so completely goddamn irresponsible. I thought you talked to him. Didn't you say nothing to him?"

"Someone else can set choke," Kramer said back.

"Yeah? Who? You?"

"I don't care."

"Well, I ain't paying you faller's wages for setting choke!"

Everyone was quiet on the way down but wished Kramer goodnight at the landing where their rigs were parked, to show they weren't choosing sides.

Kramer drove fast down the Crown mainline. She was in the cab of the truck with him. She said she wanted to trade sex for transportation, but he said he was willing to give her a ride for nothing.

It was still light when he got to the house. Gowen's truck was not there. He went past the driveway and down the lane that led behind the barn to the old icehouse that had been used for years to store dynamite for Barber Logging. He backed the truck up to the ramp and fished the key to the icehouse from its niche under the steps. Inside he methodically pulled the light chain and took down the clipboard that held a sheaf of papers containing his federal license to handle explosives and the federally mandated log of entries and withdrawals. Automatically he eyeballed the stacks of crates, checking against the balance on his record. He penciled in his intended withdrawal of two crates with the date and his signature and hung the clipboard back on its nail. As he eased the top corner case into his arms, he felt a sharp bite where the heavy box pressed against his belly.

He grunted and put the crate back on top of the stack. He fingered his belly through the front of his shirt, thinking he had pinched a spider and it had bitten him back. A nailhead winked at him in the light. He bent

and examined the lid of the crate. All the nails had been started and pushed back into place. The force of his fingertips under the edge of the lid was sufficient to pry up an end; then he yanked the lid the rest of the way off and threw it against the wall, cursing and knowing already what had happened but looking, counting anyway. Four sticks were missing.

"Goddamn you, Gowen!" he shouted.

He retrieved the lid of the crate and hammered it back into place with his fist, cracking the wood and cutting the heel of his hand. He set the box aside—it had been invalidated, and he could no longer be responsible for it—and loaded two others into the back of his pickup. He took the key to the icehouse away with him in his pocket. He and Gowen had already had this discussion. If Gowen wanted to blow stumps in his pot patch, a goddamn dumb idea anyway, he could get his own goddamn dynamite.

He gunned the truck back up the lane and into the driveway. He banged the front door open against the bottle-and-can garbage in the corner and yelled for Gowen. He already knew Gowen was not home, and the foolishness of shouting for him increased his rage. He stomped up the stairs and kicked open the doors to the bathroom and Gowen's bedroom, neither of which he bothered to enter.

As he descended thunderously, he shouted, "Gowen! Gowen!" at the top of his voice. A dull, flat explosion thudded against the south side of the house. Another, louder, followed. Kramer tripped and stumbled heavily as he ran toward the back door, bowling it off its hinges as he went through.

Beyond the back porch railing a great yellow flower was lofting its head against the dark ridge above Old Frick's Spring. The position of the methamphetamine factory was explicitly revealed as a third and very different concussion sent the separated roof and sides of a house trailer skyward like newspapers in a wind. The gleaming tongue of an aluminum storm door wagged back and forth as the front section of the trailer fell noiselessly back into the roiling blob of orange and blue flame. Just as Gowen had said, the location of the meth lab was one that the Kramer brothers knew well, a spot beside Old Frick's Spring where grew a huge big-leaf maple tree that they had played in as children and which now flared in the rebounding blast like a great skeleton holding a hundred candelabra in its arms.

Kramer ran back through the house and the front yard to his pickup and raced to the concrete bridge at Long Andrew Road. He swerved wildly onto the gravel track and ran beneath alder trees standing in the margin of the brown river. Hammering over the cattle guard that marked the entrance to Old Frick's pasture, he looked up at the house on its knoll. The windows were lit with the reflection of the fire on the hill, and the door was standing wide open. The grey forms of the wolves

twisted and turned in their cages. Cows were stampeding in wide circles in the pasture. The bull, standing its ground suddenly, charged the oncoming pickup. Kramer swerved off the road as the bull slammed into his fender. The engine screamed as he gunned over wet turf, on across the pasture to the second cattle guard at the edge of the timber.

He could smell the fire now, not the smell of a forest fire but a chemical odor like cat urine or perfume, department store perfume, and then, as he rounded the first switchback, he could hear the crackling and the deep bass hum of the fire above him on the ridge. Flaming brands rained down on the truck's hood. The narrow cut of the roadway was incandescent, and in its center stood a figure. Kramer jammed the brakes as the first muzzle crack sent a slug smashing through the windshield. Another followed, and Kramer tore open his door, his momentum spilling him into the deep ditch beside the road. Pain shot through his leg as he struggled to rise. Above him in the wavering light the muzzle of a gun pointed at his face.

"Mine, Kramer!"

And then nothing but the howling of the fire. Kramer crawled into the cab of the truck and drove one-legged in reverse down the switchback into Old Frick's pasture. As he struggled to turn the truck around in the slippery pasture, he looked up toward the house and saw her small, still figure watching from a corner of the chainlink kennels in which the wolves were furiously leaping and spinning.

Wes Greenly had suckered Gowen, come to the door with a story that Barber had sent him after dynamite, Kramer busy falling and it was just a couple of sticks they needed, but right away, so they had the choker-setter run down the mountain and back real quick. Sounded plausible. What the hell, how was he supposed to know Wes wasn't even working for Barber any more? It wasn't like Kramer ever communicated anything. Plus, it didn't look like Kramer understood what the hell was going on even though he had gotten his nose right up in the crack of the whole deal. Goddamn Kramer! Explosives plus any kind of crime equaled federal jurisdiction, and here he was, he had already had one brush with the Feds, it wasn't like on TV, he had a record, was looking like an accessory to a capital crime, and Kramer was stuck on the idea this was some kind of adolescent screw-up where he was going to have to be taught a lesson. Maybe Kramer was in shock. Before he'd even cleaned himself up after the fire and Wes shooting at him—his clothes still smoking for Christ' sake, never mind the broken foot—he'd sat himself down at the kitchen table with a ballpoint pen and the appropriate government form to make out a report on the four missing sticks of dynamite. Gowen had come behind him and seen what he was doing and said to him, "How about driving around in a forest fire with two cases of dynamite in the back of your pickup truck, you gonna report that, too?"

"Fine!" Kramer had exploded. He balled up the paper and slammed it in the stove, and that was when he started with the silent treatment. When Gowen had said to him, "You want to do something back to him? I'll help you if you want," Kramer had just looked at him with his eyes bugging out, and about then Gowen figured two things: one, shut up, he's ready to whack you, and two, get your own story together, because you don't know what the hell he's going to do.

Gowen spent Friday, the day after the blast, away from the house, not wanting to be there when the law knocked on the door. He had gone from the store to the Vildefeld Lunch and then to the tavern, managing to kill the whole day. At first he tried to avoid people, but then, after a few beers, it was business as usual. He kept waiting for it, but no one said to him, Hey, what happened up your way? What was the big noise? It crossed his mind, all that jazz about the local acoustics, Kramer's Bend acoustics in particular that Kramer made such a big deal out of, like the big boom—three of them really, a big one and then boom! boom! two more right after—had been held in place, or maybe deflected somewhere, bounced up into the sky or into some other neighborhood, or maybe somehow actually sucked back into that cul-de-sac where the big big-leaf maple stood beside Old Frick's Spring. No one said anything about the fire either, but then a heavy rain had started up just as Kramer was getting out of there. Like the landscape itself didn't want the news broadcast. He didn't believe this, just liked to play with the idea of it in his mind as he got into a good buzz from the beer and, later out behind the tavern with the guys, the reefer.

Kramer had gone to work that day with his broken foot. When Gowen came home, he was looking out the back window through the binoculars. He still wasn't talking.

"Anybody say anything to you?" Gowen asked him. No answer.

"The Mexicans are gone. Cleared out completely, looks like." Still nothing.

"Jeanellen and Lydia, too. Left the goats behind. Can't believe that."

Kramer sighed loudly through his nose.

"I don't get it. Where are the cops?"

Kramer rose and advanced upon him so suddenly he started back. As Kramer rocked past him on the busted foot, he punched the binoculars into Gowen's chest. It was almost friendly, some communication at least. Gowen focused the binoculars on Old Frick's. Wes Greenly was over there, feeding the wolves.

Over the space of the next two weeks Gowen weighed one cover story after another as he waited for the authorities to show up. Between him and Kramer the binoculars were kept on Old Frick's and on the flank of Long Andrew Ridge a good percentage of the daylight hours and into the night. They watched Wes coming and going. No timber cruiser appeared overhead in a helicopter or drove a truck up Long Andrew Road

through the blackened patch of timber. They didn't see any firewood poachers, although it was a bad time of year for that anyway with the mud and the snow up high. Hunting season was over, fishing had yet to commence. It could well be that Fisher's meth customers figured he had had to make a quick move, or had been taken by the law. Doubtful Fisher had a dear old mom who called Sundays to see how he was doing, or an ex-wife waiting for a support check.

No one, no deputy sheriff, no state trooper came to the Kramers' door to ask: What happened? What do you know? What did you see? Hear?

Lurking in the back of Gowen's mind when he was sober and let out for a gleeful prance when he was loaded, the wacky idea that had first visited him in the Trail's End Tavern the first day after the blast began to assert itself as belonging to the realm of daylight and reality. Kramer hadn't called the cops, the Mexicans with no green cards wanted none of it, Wes Greenly obviously wasn't about to, nor was Fisher's—now Wes's—little meth whore. That left Jeanellen and Lydia to tell the world. Maybe they hadn't gotten around to it yet. Figured someone else would surely have called it in and they were best out of it. Wes the recipient of a backhanded female absolution: washed that man right out of their hair right away. Or they had told but without picking up a phone to the authorities, their interlocutors maybe disbelieving them, or believing them and wagging their heads still without anybody picking up a telephone.

It was May already. Could it be, was it possible, that such a large event had gone unnoticed by the world? Indeed, it looked as if the only physical testimonials to the murder by dynamite of Mr. Wolf-man Fisher and the spectacular wipeout of his enterprise were to be the clunky wad of plaster and cloth applied to Kramer's foot by the alcoholic homeopath in PeeDee, who asked no questions, and, against the deepening pea soup of spring growth on the flank of Long Andrew Ridge the still visible—though at fifty miles per hour only if you happened to look at exactly the right moment between the corner of the Kramer house and the tall stand of trees by the Hinsvaark Bridge—great blackened skeleton of the big-leaf maple.

"It occur to you," he asked Kramer, "that it's just you, me, Wes, and the Fisher woman gonna deal with this crime? Or not, as we choose?"

Kramer just smiled back at him and didn't say anything.

May passed, and June. Kramer had gone back to work with the cast still on his foot, his face screwed up with pain, but that had not lasted long. Out of unthinkable carelessness he neglected to face-cut a small alder, and it barber-chaired, smacking him on the crown, luckily a glancing blow but enough to knock him cold. Summarily furloughed until he healed up, Kramer had uncharacteristically given in to his codeine prescription. He slept, and when awake seemed only preparing for more sleep.

Gowen had surreptitiously visited ground zero at Old Frick's Spring not long after the blast. He had gone there again in late spring and several times in the full leaf of summer as irrepressible blackberry, salmon-berry, burdock, horsetail, nettles, and river grass and the root suckers of the blasted maple itself progressively obscured and then swallowed completely the metal and glass detritus of Fisher the Wolf-man's meth lab. In mid-July, Gowen spied Wes Greenly hard at work. He hid, watched. By August, daily smoke was rising from a stovepipe jutting from the window of a small pod-shaped trailer that Wes had hauled on to the site. The smell of cat urine came to Gowen on the airs moving up and down the Neslolo River.

Gowen kept his eye out for the Fisher woman. He could pretend to Kramer, who wasn't curious about anything lately, that he had seen the Fisher woman when actually he had not. He climbed up Long Andrew and came down the other side to spy on the house from Old Frick's high pasture. He considered that she might be gone, although the wolves were still there. Getting stoned and peering out from the shade of the timber into the blue-green valley under a high, clean sky—it was actually pretty amusing, in a way. The whole thing could have been made up. Or existed only in their imaginations. Or better, was a thing destined to become an old story, like the old family stories Kramer used to tell him when he was little, a story closed round and kept secret by vast forest.

For the present, the story had become untellable even between themselves. Whenever Gowen attempted to engage Kramer on the subject of the blast, his brother would turn away with that short chopping motion of his hand.

Kramer's taciturnity was a deepening of a trait he already possessed, but other changes in him were more alarming. Even after his foot healed up, Kramer didn't go back to work. He never said he wasn't going back, he just didn't. There wasn't much Gowen could say about any of this, or about Kramer staying abed during the day and roaming around the place at night, packing a pistol everywhere he went. Or about talking aloud to himself out of doors. All summer, the most Gowen could get out of his brother was help cutting firewood. For short periods of time, as they worked together, Kramer would seem himself again. But these spells of energy and clarity were followed by even worse bouts of drinking. Most nights Kramer sat with a bottle at the kitchen table looking out the back door, and on nights when the coyotes got the wolves riled up he was apt to charge onto the porch and empty his gun into the sky.

Fall came and the rains and the good logging weather, and still Kramer did not go back to the woods. Gowen met Barber coming off their front porch one day in October and asked him, "He going back?" Barber had looked down and up and back down, as if he were about to make a major pronouncement, but then just said, "I don't know what to tell ya."

A few days before Christmas, Deputy Julius Maksymic pulled Gowen over for a loud muffler as he was cruising down Highway 26 on his way to Seaside. Jule only gave him a warning and didn't even bother to ask him to step out of the truck. He said, "Hey, maybe you can do me a little favor, Gowen. You probably owe me a favor or two, don't you?"

"Yeah, probably so."

"We're looking for a guy maybe you seen or heard about up your way. Meth cook named Lawrence Fisher. Goes by the name of Rex Fisher also. Got a little gal with him. No? Sure?"

"You know I ain't into that, Jule."

"Yeah, yeah. But you would also know, wouldn't you, if he was in the neighborhood."

"Hey, I mind my own business."

"Please don't b.s. me around, Gow."

"No, seriously, listen, Jule, if the dude shows up or I even hear anything, I know who to call."

"The Feds got warrants out for both of them. The female is wanted in California and Idaho as a material witness to two murders. Seems she likes the bad boys, goes from one to the other."

Gowen continued on to Seaside so Jule wouldn't get suspicious but finished his shopping in a hurry and returned home. He couldn't wait to tell Kramer. But when he got back to the house, Kramer was not there, and when Kramer finally did come in late that night, he lumbered drunkenly up the stairs and fell into his bed. In the morning when Kramer finally crawled out Gowen still hesitated, unwilling to squander his piece of news on Kramer's morning funk.

"What's the matter with you?" Kramer demanded at supper that night.

"Nothing."

January passed. In February the Neslolo finally did roll up out of her channel and into the pasture. Across her flat, tan surge Gowen watched through the binoculars the wolves in their kennels and Wes Greenly coming and going.

"I don't think she's over there," he said to Kramer.

"She's there," Kramer said.

"I got information on her," he said.

"You shut your goddamn filthy lying mouth!"

One night in March Gowen challenged his brother, attempting to separate him from his bottle, and Kramer beat him brutally. The next day Kramer refused to apologize. Gowen packed and left, removing himself to his framed tent on Long Andrew. It was cold and wet, and he was being stupid not just clearing out and letting Kramer go completely crazy all by himself. But then, even if he couldn't change anything, he had to stay to see how it would end.

Consequently he was in position to spot her in his binoculars, late in the afternoon of a changeable April day, as she crossed the river in an aluminum canoe, tied up at the Kramers' floating dock, and made her way across the wet pasture to the back yard and up onto the back porch to be let in the back door.

He came down then. He circled around behind the barn and ran along the highway to the front of the house. He saw her shadow pass across the windowshade. He crept onto the porch and peered in the window between the edge of the shade and the sash. He saw Kramer holding a cup in front of her, extending it to her with both hands and her hands atop his so that it was together that they delivered the first hot sip to her lips. Then Gowen, who had never in his life knocked on that door, knocked.

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FICTION

A LEG Up



David
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Hanford City at three in the morning is a pretty lonely place. The sidewalks have been rolled up, and the streets are empty. If you're not sleeping and you're not a cop, you're probably up to something. All I knew that early Saturday morning was that I was getting hungry.

"Worst," Dwight called out. "Isn't it your turn to buy dinner?" My last name is Durst, but my partner Officer Dwight Gillis, one of Hanford City's finest, insisted on calling me Worst.

"I don't think so," I told him. "As I recall, I bought last night. And the night before that if I'm not mistaken."

"I think maybe you are," he replied. "I distinctly remember picking up the check at Mr. Chow's just the other night."

"Yeah," I retorted. "You picked it up and handed it to me!"

"Whatever," Dwight replied. "But I still think it's your turn."

Now, all this time, mind you, we weren't so deeply engrossed in our rich conversation that we weren't performing actual police work. Quite the contrary. While Dwight drove, our eagle eyes scanned other cars, houses, businesses, you name it. That's how it first caught my eye.

We were cruising down Madison, passing the new city library construction site, when I saw something and told Dwight to hang a U-turn.

"What's up?" he wanted to know as he cranked the wheel hard to the left.

"I'm not sure. I think I might have seen something back there."

"Whaddya think it is?"

"I don't know." As I told him to pull up to the curb at the construction site, I flipped on my spotlight and shone it on the area around a large mound of dirt. Dwight was looking at where I was pointing the light, and our jaws must've dropped when we realized what we were seeing.

Sticking out of the mound of dirt was a human leg, clothed in what looked like baggy jeans with a sock and one of those hideous tennis shoes that are so popular with teenagers these days, neatly tied.

"What the hell?" was about the best Dwight could come up with. I radioed dispatch, telling them we were going to be out of our vehicle investigating suspicious circumstances.

We got out of the cruiser, clicked our flashlights on, and walked up to the mound slowly, our hands on our guns. If this was what we thought it was, the person who did it might still have been nearby. We scanned the area, but it was as still as you'd expect it to be at three A.M.

The closer we got to the leg, and presumably the rest of a body, the eerier the whole scene became. It sank in that what we were looking at was a dead human being. Or at least part of one. The leg wasn't moving at all, not so much as a twitch, and the angle it was at, well, you'd have a heck of a time holding it in that position unless you had the helping hand of rigor mortis.

Dwight and I looked at each other. It was time to call in what we'd found to dispatch. It was a big mo-

ment for us. We'd been working the beat together for three years now, and here we'd stumbled across our first one eighty-seven. The question was who got to call it in. I told Dwight to go ahead, but he told me to go ahead. We looked at each other for what seemed like an hour but was probably more like ten seconds. Then I clicked on my mike and said as officially as possible, "Dispatch, this is One L Sixteen. We have a possible one eighty-seven on Madison at the library construction site."

There was a moment of silence instead of an acknowledgment from the dispatcher. This must have been big news to her, too. I was about to call it in again when she got back on the air.

"Ten-four, One L Sixteen, on that one eighty-seven. We'll send some backup your way. You copy, One L Fifteen?"

One L Thirteen and Fifteen clicked in with their ten-fours, and Dwight and I stared at each other for a few more moments, wondering what we should do until they arrived.

"We should probably tape off the area," Dwight suggested. He was right. I got the yellow crime scene tape out of our trunk. The last time we'd used it was when that manhole cover was stolen and we had strung the tape to warn anyone who might fall into the opening. Now we were stringing it up at the scene of a real homicide, and we realized that we had no idea how much of the area we should mark off. So we erred on the side of caution. We started the tape at our pa-

trol car and stretched it in a hundred foot radius around the mound. We had just finished when One L Fifteen arrived with overhead lights flashing.

Hunter and Drake were in One L Fifteen. Drake was a rookie just four months out of the academy, while Hunter must have become a cop before there even was an academy. He was Hanford City's senior officer, and he never let you forget it. Drake spent most of his time staying out of Hunter's way.

Hunter nitpicked all of us endlessly, with enough "in my days" and "back thens" to make every other officer want to contribute to his retirement fund so he could retire a day early. That night he was in rare form.

"Well lookie at the scene you boys have taped off. I bet if you'd had enough tape you'd have stretched it to the city limits sign, by way of Timbuktu," were the first words out of his mouth. He lifted the tape and walked under it, then strutted toward the leg. At the speed he was going, it looked like he planned to walk right over the mound.

I seemed to remember something about crime scene preservation, so I yelled out to him, "Hey, Hunter! Shouldn't we be preserving the crime scene for the detectives?"

Hunter turned and looked at me. I don't know if it was intentional, but his flashlight swung around so it was pointing straight up, toward the underside of his chin, like he was about to tell a ghost story beside a campfire. Did I mention that he didn't like detectives either?



"The detectives?" he seethed. "You think they're so high and mighty? I'll have you know we have every right to be at this scene and to investigate the crime at hand."

"I just don't think they'd appreciate it if the scene got contaminated," I replied.

"Contaminated? You think I'm gonna take a pee over here or something?" Hunter spit the words out like he'd just bitten into a mealy apple. Thank goodness the detective on call, Ed Engle, showed up when he did.

"Hunter, the hell are you doing over there?" Engle shouted. Hunter turned, indignant, about to spout off, until he saw who had spoken. Technically Hunter and Engle were the same rank, but it was well known around the station house that detectives were at least a couple of notches higher than the rest of us. Which didn't bother me one bit, since this crime scene would become their responsibility. Don't get me wrong. I like solving crimes as much as the next guy, but for just finding the body Dwight and I were going to be up to our ears in paperwork. Investigating the case would have the detectives drowning in a flood of paperwork. No thanks. I prefer to be out on the beat, catching 'em in the act.

Despite his indignation, Hunter managed to take a few steps backward, away from the leg. Dwight and I walked over to the leg with Engle, who had flipped open his little black notebook.

"So you guys found the body, huh?" he asked. We nodded. "Did you touch or disturb anything?" We

shook our heads and muttered uh-huhs. "You're sure about that?" This time our nods were accompanied by uh-huhs. Engle scribbled furiously in his notebook.

This was Hanford City's first homicide in at least five years, so he must have been as excited as the rest of us. Right about then Hunter offered one of his brilliant insights.

"The way the body is positioned, my guess is we can rule out suicide," he said. If anyone else had made that remark, we'd have assumed he was kidding. But Hunter was serious. I don't think Engle wrote down Hunter's observation in his book.

"I'm gonna go get my camera," Engle said. As he walked toward his car, two other detectives arrived in separate cars. Ogden and Keenan were good guys like Engle, which meant that Hunter was bound to smart-off any second. But when he walked up to the mound, Ogden shot Hunter some sort of look, and Hunter bit his tongue. Ogden was also a long-time veteran, and like Engle, he knew how to handle Hunter.

Ogden and Keenan nodded to Dwight and me, and we nodded back.

"How long has it been," Ogden asked the other two detectives, "since the last one of these?" The detectives thought for a moment. I already knew the answer, but it would have been a serious breach of cop etiquette to shout it out.

"'Bout five years," Keenan finally said. The other detectives murmured their agreement, and Engle

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began photographing the mound, first with a Polaroid, then with a 35mm. When he was satisfied that he had taken enough pictures, he turned to the other detectives. "Shall we?"

They all nodded agreement, and Engle handed the cameras and the Polaroid photos to me. The three detectives brushed away some of the dirt around the body and began to pull on the leg, gently at first, then with more effort. After a short while they let go of the leg, looked at each other, and grinned.

"I'll take care of this," said Keenan. He went back to his car, popped the trunk, and fished around for a moment. He shut the trunk, and we could see that he was carrying a shovel. I thought the crime scene would have been better preserved if the dirt were moved with bare hands, but again police etiquette prevailed.

Without regard for much of anything in the way of evidence preservation, Keenan stuck the shovel into the dirt and pushed it in with his right foot. The shovel sank into the soft dirt like it was warm butter, and he tossed the shoveled dirt to one side. He did this a couple more times, even striking the body with the shovel a few times, until it was almost completely uncovered. The only parts still in the dirt were the neck and head and left leg, which was still buried within the mound.

It was a real mess. The visible limbs were arranged in a most unnatural fashion. This was not a pleasant death we were looking at.

Engle snatched the cameras and took a few more shots before Kee-

nan bent down, poised to uncover the face. I can't speak for the rest of the cops at the scene, but I know I held my breath, wondering if the face would be that of someone I knew.

Then, like he was a child splashing in the tub, Keenan brushed the dirt off the body's face, and my jaw dropped again. The look on the face was, like the position of the legs and arms, unnatural, and I stared for a few moments before I realized what I was looking at. This wasn't a human being at all. It was a mannequin. A very lifelike one for certain, but still only a mannequin.

The detectives shared a chuckle, and Hunter momentarily forgot his hatred of detectives so he could direct his animus at me and my partner.

"Good job, guys," he said mockingly. "I'm sure Mrs. Mannequin has been up all night worrying about her husband. Now you get to call her and tell her he's just been here taking a nap." Hunter thought that was really funny. He didn't notice that he was the only one laughing.

The truth was, we were a little embarrassed, seeing as how we'd gotten the detectives out of bed at this wretched hour for nothing. But they were understanding, full of "coulda happened to anyone" and "I'd have done the same thing."

"Looks like some sort of sick joke," Engle said as he headed back for his car. "Why don't you guys notify dispatch that it's not a one eighty-seven."

I clicked on my mike. "Dispatch," I said, "this is One L Sixteen; it's



negative on a one eighty-seven out here. It was just a mannequin."

"Ten-four, One L Sixteen," dispatch replied. There was a hint of relief and a trace of laughter in her voice.

The other officers, including Hunter, thankfully, left the scene. Hunter was still cackling as he drove away. We pulled down all the crime scene tape and shoved it along with the mannequin into our trunk. We climbed into our cruiser and sat in silence for a moment. I broke it by suggesting that we get something to eat.

"Good idea," Dwight said, "I think it's your turn to buy, anyway."

So we radioed dispatch and headed in silence toward Denny's. Halfway there the silence was broken by a radio call.

"One L Sixteen, divert from Code Seven and investigate an alarm at the Cosmopolitan Male retail store, 620 Birch. The alarm company's been holding the call for about two hours now."

Birch Street was just a few blocks away. Cosmopolitan Male was located in Hanford City Square, one of those outdoor shopping centers. Unless you drove into the parking lot and took a walk into the long outdoor promenade, you wouldn't be able to see the store. Which was probably why apparently no one had noticed that the storefront had been smashed.

Broken glass was everywhere, inside and outside the store. A trail of glass even led part of the way toward the shopping center's back parking lot. There was a set of skidmarks that started on the sidewalk

about ten feet outside the store and stopped on the carpet about ten feet inside the store.

"What a mess," I said to Dwight.

"Yeah," he replied. "You'd think they'd at least vacuum after they close up at night." It wasn't the greatest joke of all time, but it was funnier than Hunter's.

We lit up the store with our flashlights and took a good look around. We checked under and around all the racks and in the dressing rooms but didn't find anyone. And while we couldn't be certain, it didn't look like anything much had been taken. A couple of racks and shelves had been knocked down and their merchandise lay splayed on the floor, but there were no obvious gaps.

We shook our heads and scanned the store one more time. This time I didn't see anything but Dwight did. He shone his light on the feet of one of the mannequins and said, "Look at that." I looked, but it didn't register at first. A moment later it did and I took the walk back to our patrol car and popped the trunk. The hideous shoes our mannequin was wearing? They were the same kind of hideous shoes the mannequin in Cosmopolitan Male was wearing. I couldn't imagine that there'd be that many shops selling shoes as ugly as those.

I slammed the trunk shut and walked back. Dwight looked at me, and I nodded. We'd found where our mannequin had come from, and at least part of the explanation for how he left the store and wound up at the construction site. It was too much to hope that there'd be a



trail of broken glass to lead us to the culprit, but we followed what was there to the back parking lot.

The parking lot lights were still on. They'd go off in an hour or so when the sun came up. Everything looked as it should have except for a shiny plastic wheel cover about fifty feet from the curb at the end of the sidewalk. Lots of cars had these wheel covers, but when we saw this one, a bulging, star-shaped one, a name jumped to mind: Radley Shanks.

Radley was the town ne'er-do-well. When he wasn't sloshed and getting beaten up in bar fights, he was a sloshed spectator at bar fights. He drove an ancient, rusted-out Pontiac. It was one of those beasts whose hood was a different color from the fenders, which were in turn a different color from the doors, and so on. He'd put the wheel covers on it about six months ago, and in so doing had doubled the car's value if you didn't count the value of the gasoline in the tank.

We radioed One L Seventeen and asked them to swing by Radley's house to count his wheel covers. Sure enough, one was missing, so we had them bring him in.

At the station, Radley smelled like a brewery. We put him into an interrogation room with a two-way mirror so we could keep an eye on him. He looked very nervous. He kept fidgeting and looking around the room though there was no one else there. We let him simmer a while before we went in.

When we opened the door, Radley practically jumped out of his skin. He was scared to death of

something. It couldn't have been the police station, since this wasn't his first time here. Something serious was bothering him.

Dwight and I smiled at him and I spoke first. "How are you doing tonight, Radley?"

Radley looked at us like we were the faces of death. I got the feeling he was itching to say something.

"Is there something you want to tell us, Radley?" I asked.

He looked around some more before looking straight down at the table and shaking his head. "He's dead, isn't he?" he said.

Dwight and I exchanged a look. "Who's dead?" Dwight asked.

"The guy," Radley responded.

"What guy?" I asked.

"You know the one or you wouldn't have brought me here."

"We don't know what you're talking about," I told him.

He looked at each one of us, contemplating his next words. "The guy at that store in the mall."

"Oh, that guy," I said. "Why don't you tell us what happened?"

"I was . . ."

"Wait a sec, Radley," I interrupted. "You know your Miranda rights, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah," Radley muttered, "the right to remain silent, blah blah blah."

"All right, go ahead."

"So I had a few over at Jimmy's, and I'm on my way home." He took a deep breath. "And I'm running late. Waaay late, and I just know my old lady's gonna kill me, 'cause it's like the third or fourth night in a row I been out too late. So I figured I'd take a shortcut. If you cut



through the mall, you know, you can get from Birch to Maple without going all the way around the Hudson loop."

"So you cut through the mall?" Dwight said.

"Yeah. You're just supposed to drive through the parking lot, but I was really late. I mean *really* late, so I cut across the sidewalk. It's a little rough on the tires, but twenty seconds is twenty seconds, 'specially if it's the difference between my wife killin' me and maybe not killin' me. So I get up on the sidewalk and I'm goin' along okay when this sign advertising a sale on formal wear catches my eye and the next thing I know I'm headed straight for that shop window. I hit the brakes, but it's too late, and *crash!*, *boom!*, *bang!*, I'm in the store. No big deal, right, no one's around to see me, 'cept I get outa my car to see if it's damaged and I see I ran over this guy. I think, oh great, this is the last thing I need. If I take him to the hospital, I'm *really* gonna be late, so I gotta think about what I'm gonna do. I decide to do the right thing, and I pick him up. He was really light, but I figured that was because he musta lost a lotta blood. I put him in the back seat and got outa there.

"While I'm drivin', I keep lookin' at him, and he's not movin'. I mean not movin' at all, and he's not makin' any noise. It was really spooky. So I pulled over next to the construction site so I can check maybe his pulse or somethin'. I grabbed his wrist. Man, the guy was already stiff, and I figured takin' him to the hospital wasn't gonna do either of

us any good, so I dragged him over to that big pile of dirt and covered him up best I could. I was still covering him with dirt when I got spooked by some headlights down the street and ran for my car. I took off and headed home, which is where y'all found me, so I assume you found *him*."

Dwight and I looked at each other. We had to work awfully hard to suppress the grins that were building.

"All right, Radley, thanks for telling us what happened. Doesn't confession feel good, like a weight's been lifted off your shoulders?"

Radley nodded. He looked like he was ready to cry—some drunks often are. "It sure does."

Dwight and I stood up and left the room.

"So, when do you want to tell him he didn't kill anybody?" Dwight asked.

"In a bit. Let's let him enjoy his relief a bit longer. Then we can tell him about the drunk driving, reckless driving, vandalism, and burglary charges," I replied.

"So how 'bout we grab something to eat?"

"That's the best idea you've had all night."

A few minutes later we pulled into the Denny's parking lot. The first thing we saw was another patrol car.

"Oh, great," Dwight said. "Car Fifteen—Hunter. Again."

"You wanna go somewhere else?" I asked.

"Nah, we're hungry and we're already here."

Thankfully, Hunter and Drake



were leaving as we walked in. We braced ourselves for Hunter's inevitable comment.

"Well, if it isn't Holmes and Watson," Hunter said. "I'm surprised you two have time to eat. I heard there's a ventriloquist's dummy on the lam; I figured you'd be hot on the trail by now."

I wanted to say something smart back at him. I held my tongue, but my partner didn't.

"Looks like we just found him," Dwight shot back.

Hunter just stood there not knowing what to say. Dwight grinned at him.

"Pretty gutsy, my friend," I told him as the waitress approached our table.

"It's a two-way street. If he wants to dish it out, he should be able to take it. Besides, I knew it was a mannequin all along."

"Sure you did," I said. I smiled at the waitress. "You can give the bill to my partner over there. It's his turn to pay."

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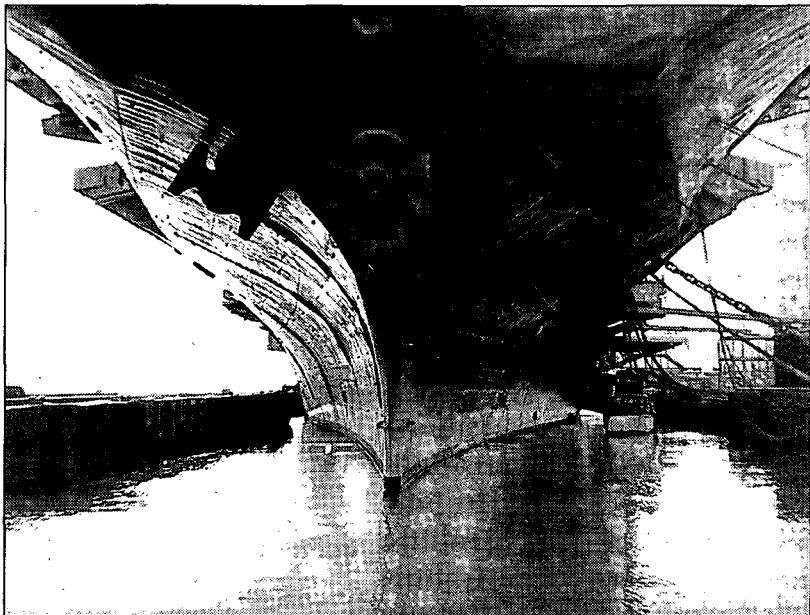
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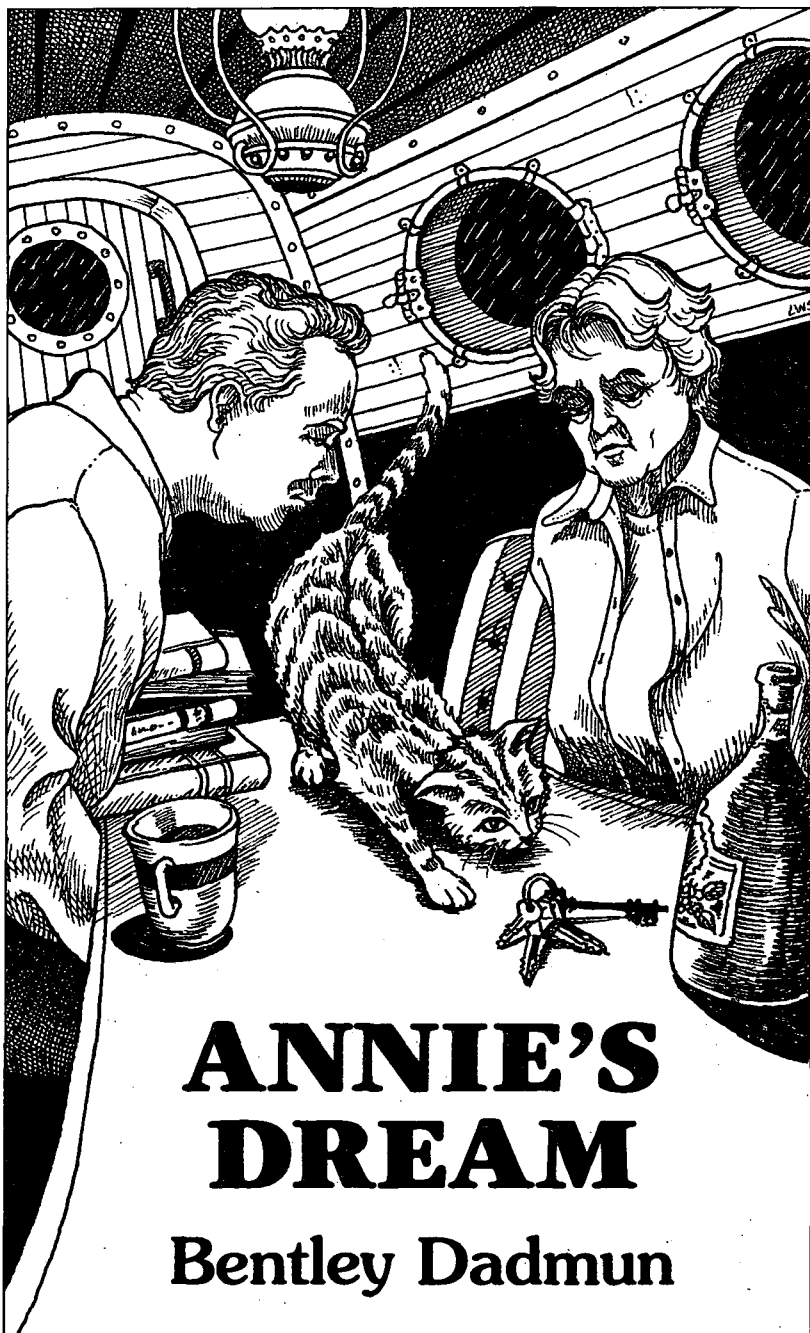


*Photo by Rolan Fajardo*

That sinking feeling. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION



# ANNIE'S DREAM

Bentley Dadmun

Illustration by Linda Weatherly

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/99

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**T**he Farm is seven miles of bad roads from anywhere and has occupied sixty-three acres of scrub pine and rock-laden pasture since Teddy Roosevelt was thrashing around the White House. Now, at the other end of the century, it is home to eighty or ninety senior citizens, several aging cows, a few semiferal chickens, and a handicapped cat.

The majority of the senior citizens ended up at The Farm because they were living their lives on the two-hundred-year plan and handled their money accordingly. The animals, like most domesticated critters, had little choice in the matter.

The animals make do with a large shed, and the barn houses most of the humans. Those who don't live in the barn reside in a motley collection of trailers and RV's that squat like disgruntled sows in the pastures surrounding the barn.

Except for me and the cat. We live in a thirty-six foot mahogany sloop cradled in the middle of a windblown grove of hardwood in the north pasture.

Annie Kokar, closet misanthrope, Renaissance woman, and retired veterinarian, is the owner of The Farm and keeper of the purse. It is by her efforts that The Farm stays solvent and the residents warm, fed, and relatively free of despair and errant behavior.

I am very attached to the boat. We suit each other, for we are both old drifters, sharing a propensity for solitary wanderings and a desire to keep our distance from others and walk our own path.

Several weeks ago I walked a path.

A path that put Duncan, Annie's son, in prison for more years than he is probably capable of enduring and plunged Annie into a quagmire of despair and anger.

I was told to leave The Farm.

The number of dollars I presently control do not allow for more than a corner room in Teller's Hotel, a dim, crowded slum catering to nearly destitute seniors. Two ancient suitcases and a bulging duffel rested quietly beside several stacks of books, waiting.

I sighed, pulled the last of the Lancers out of the refrigerator, filled a yellow plastic mug, and slumped in the settee.

Cat, always astute, was aware that something profound was happening and, having the feline distaste for disruption and change, was coping by spending most of her time in the cavelike berth under the cockpit. Hearing me fill the mug, she decided to join me, limped out of her nest, and pulled on the cuff of my pants with her good paw. I picked her up, set her on the table, and between sips massaged the scarred tissues of her small, frail body.

I upended the bottle and watched the last drops of wine splash into the mug. I wondered if it would be worth the effort to hike to the barn and snag a bottle from one of the old refrigerators lining the wall in the makeshift kitchen. Thunderstorms were imminent, and Cat, who insists on accompanying me on every journey, does not tolerate thunderstorms well. She clamps herself to

my chest, pants like an exhausted puppy, and drools profusely.

I peered out the window to check the weather.

And probably performed a classic doubletake.

Dressed in bright yellow raingear a Gloucester lobsterman would envy, gripping a long walking staff, and clutching a plastic bag to her chest, Annie marched across the clearing to the boat. I listened to her climb the stairs, drop into the cockpit, and hammer on the hatch with the staff.

She was undoubtedly here to deliver an ultimatum. I had told her I would be gone by the end of April, and that bitter day was fast approaching. I struggled to my feet and pushed open the hatch.

She lowered an arm, and I grabbed it and helped her down the four steps into the cabin. Annie is somewhere in her seventies, looks it in a handsome way, and stares at the world through hard, flat eyes that calm hurt, frightened animals and make humans squirm. It was Annie who labored over Cat after I appeared at her door with Cat's maimed, bloodsoaked body in my arms.

She nodded curtly, handed me the bag, which obviously held a large bottle, shucked out of her raingear, and let it drop to the floor. Then she leaned her staff against the steps and, with a critical eye, surveyed the stacks of books, the two suitcases, the packed duffel, and muttered, "Going somewhere?"

A number of biting retorts rose, but I pushed them back and smiled thinly. "I'll be gone by Friday."

With pursed lips she nodded, sat down, and put her hands on the table. "I'll have a large glass of that wine, please."

So I poured her a glass from the two liter bottle she'd brought, which must have cost four or five dollars, sat down across from her, and raised my eyebrows. She ignored the inquiry, hefted Cat to the table, and ran her long, thin hands over Cat's body. "I'm surprised. She looks pathetic but is fairly healthy. You've done well by her, Harry."

"Perhaps, but the five hours you worked on her is what gave her a future."

Annie smiled briefly and drank. She set the glass down and sighed.

"I visited Duncan yesterday. He also is doing surprisingly well. I thought prison would kill him, would reduce him to suicidal pathos. But he seems to be . . . well, if not thriving, certainly coping. The highly structured life behind bars obviously suits him—he was almost smiling."

Duncan was going to spend a minimum of fifteen years in that prison, and Annie's apparent ease with that was disturbing, considering her initial reaction. So I just nodded and kept quiet.

She refilled her glass and studied me with those flat eyes as if I were an artifact someone had dug out of the south pasture. Then in a hoarse near-whisper she said, "Harry, I've been doing a bit of thinking. Reasonable, unprejudiced thinking, and I've decided that, if you want to, you may stay. You've done well by The Farm and certainly by me, and to evict you over a difference in

values is behavior that is repellent. So, if you want, you may unpack and remain here in the grove."

Casually, and with a surprisingly steady hand considering the sudden increase in my heart rate, I raised my mug, drank deeply, and asked, "Where's the string?"

She smiled, the genuine article this time. "No strings, Harry. Stay and do as you please. And if you aren't interested in my little puzzle, that's fine also."

Aha. "Your little puzzle?"

"As I said, you're free to stay. No restrictions. I would not endeavor to coerce you into anything you wouldn't want to do."

Unbidden, a smile crept across my face. "Your little puzzle?" I repeated.

She rummaged in her pants pocket, brought out a ring of keys, and dropped them on the table.

Rain started to hammer the boat, and a hard rumble rolled across the pasture and bowled through the grove. Cat struggled to her feet, teetered on the edge of the table, and with a sorrowful yowl dropped into my arms and laid her scarred head against my chest.

I picked up the key ring and fanned the keys across my palm. Four keys. Two were automotive, with Chrysler's five-pointed star stamped on the end of each one. There was also a smallish key of tarnished brass and a large skeleton key with that characteristic notched piece of flat metal at the working end. I let the keys dangle in my hand, raised my eyebrows, and said, "The keys to the kingdom?"

Annie shook her head and mut-

tered, "Unlikely. A few days ago I noticed that all my kitchenware was on the countertop or stuffed in the dishwasher and my kitchen drawers were filled with crap. It was obvious things had gotten a little out of hand and action was called for."

She paused, took a healthy swig of wine, gave me a thin-lipped smile. "So I set myself to the task, and now my utensils are back in the drawers where they belong and about forty pounds of crap is residing in our illegal landfill."

"A grand blow to the solar plexus of Entropy," I murmured.

"Indeed. In the front of the last drawer, covered by seven hundred and eight pennies, was that key ring. I had forgotten about it. It was Bob's; I found it in his coat pocket two days before he died. He had had two big strokes by then, and it was obvious he was dying. And it was equally obvious that we both wanted to get it the hell over with. At any rate, we were in the process of deciding what to do with things. What child should get what, what to do with The Farm, how badly to lie to the tax people, and all that.

"As I said, I found those keys in a coat of his, an old corduroy thing with a fur collar. He was wearing it the day he had his first stroke." She paused, her eyes on the ceiling, then she mentally shook herself, looked at me, and forced a smile. "I showed him the key ring and asked him what the keys were for and what I should do with them. One of the last coherent things he said to me was, 'My love, you hold the keys to your dream.'"

I picked the keys up and looked at them. "The keys to your dream. Did he explain?"

Annie shook her head. "He was drifting in and out, having good spells, bad spells, but usually not making much sense. Bob and I were married for forty-six and a half years, and he knew I didn't have any dream or dreams worth mentioning. My idea of a dream was a trip to the theater or an art museum, and I rarely mentioned them 'cause I knew Bob had no interest in those things."

I looked away and while pushing the keys around with my finger said, "But . . ."

"Yes, but. As I said, Harry, you're under no requirement to poke around, but if you're curious? Well, you are rather good at ferreting things out. Usually things people would rather keep hidden." She pushed herself up with both hands, struggled into her Official Gloucester Raingear, grabbed her staff, and glared at me.

I helped her up the steps, walked her across the rain-slashed deck and down the stairs. She gave me a gimlet smile and, like Diogenes off to search for that mythical honest man, stalked out of the grove.

I put another log in the woodstove, slouched on the settee, and watched the flickering shadows dance around the cabin. Like the ending of an eclipse, the darkness, the deep, dusky fear, slowly seeped out of my soul and allowed me to smile. The grove was mine again. I was, at least for now, spared the dingy hotel room, that fifteen by twenty cell with a sink and the

ABSOLUTELY NO PETS sign on the door. I hugged Cat and whispered, "We've been pardoned."

Cat, her claws hooked in my sweatshirt, yowled at the thunder and kept drooling on me.

I woke up early for the first time in days. Hands behind my head, I stared at the ceiling and smiled. Cat, annoyed that the blanket had slipped down her body, lifted her small head off the pillow, put a paw on my arm, and went, "Yeow?"

As I usually did, I gave her a little physical therapy, gently massaging the jagged scars and atrophied muscle. Then we had a quick game of wrestle-the-hand, the first in weeks.

Later, sipping coffee, I watched the squirrels try to get into the birdfeeders. While watching the struggle outside the window I toyed with the key ring I'd left on the table last night. "The keys to your dream?" I muttered. With Cat stretched out and purring in the sling across my chest, I marched through wet, dead hay across the pasture to the barn.

With Annie's connected house, the barn is almost a hundred yards of sagging, much-patched lumber that looms three stories over one's head. The years of renovation into rooms and tiny apartments have turned the interior into a dark maze that only the residents can negotiate without a guide. More than once newcomers have been found sobbing in a narrow dark hallway, lost and wondering what brought them to this groaning, creaking, wind-blown dump out in the middle of nowhere.



The front half of the second floor of the barn is a multipurpose room. It's a kitchen and dining hall, and the back part of the room is dotted with islands of castoff furniture. That's the place to linger if your desire is to listen to an unlikely version of who's doing what to whom and why.

I was a little late, but breakfast was still being served and I walked the serving line, gathering eggs, toast, and coffee. As I stood at the end of the line scanning the tables, Mildred Beede, a seamed, white-haired existentialist and sometime drinking acquaintance, gripped my shoulder.

"Harry, if you need help, I can drive you and your things to that hotel."

I gave her a grin that stretched my face. "I've been forgiven and pardoned."

Mildred glanced at Annie, sitting nearby, gripped my shoulder again, and whispered, "That's good, that's very good. But I hope you won't have to jump through too many hoops."

I carried my tray to Annie's table, put Cat on the floor, smiled at Annie, and asked, "What happened to your Chrysler?"

She raised her furry white eyebrows. "Chrysler?"

"Two of the keys belong to a Chrysler Corporation car. What kind and what happened to it?"

"We never owned a Chrysler Corporation car. Bob was devoted to GM, and we owned a long string of Buicks. When they stopped putting those little portholes on the hood, Bob fired off a nasty letter to the Buick people. They wrote back and

in a polite way told him to face reality."

"So what was he doing with a set of keys to a Chrysler?"

"I have no idea. I take it you've decided to research my puzzle?"

I shrugged. "Any ideas about the skeleton key?"

"None." She picked up a sausage and bit into it. "The last skeleton key I had was to the attic door of the last house we owned."

"Would you happen to know what Bob was doing the day he wore the jacket?"

"Besides having a massive stroke? He was at the store, taking inventory with Philip."

"The furniture store he owned?"

"Half owned. Philip Kinch was the other half of the business. As I said, they were doing inventory. Philip heard a noise, like someone choking he said, and turned around in time to see Bob fall. Said it was like the left side of his face was melting."

"And he was wearing that coat?"

"Yes, he was. Duncan had given it to him for his birthday two or three years before."

"Who did you and Bob know who owned a Chrysler product?"

She picked up another sausage link and bared her teeth. She chewed, looked at me, and shook her head. "Damned if I can think of anyone."

"Is Philip still around?"

"The last I heard, and this was some years ago—I never did like the man—he was living in town with his daughter. I believe her name is Ogden, Donna Ogden."

I mentally braced myself. "How

about Duncan? Did he ever own a Chrysler product?"

Her stare was deadly, but she finally exhaled and whispered, "He always drove Fords."

I found Cat hunkered down in the middle of a rickety card table surrounded by four cooing matrons dressed for a day of spring gardening. A fair-sized chunk of Canadian bacon was firmly grasped in her mouth, and her purr was audible above the baby talk the ladies were emitting as they petted her.

Cat saw me and limped to the edge of the table, and I eased her into the sling. Rose Waterhouse, a thick, whitehaired woman with the eyes of an abused Bambi, gave me a lopsided smile. "Rumor has it the Dragon Lady has granted you a stay of execution."

I patted Cat and said, "It's my radiant personality. Tell me, Rose, in your younger days what did you use skeleton keys for?"

She raised her eyebrows, put a finger against her lips, and said, "As I remember, mostly to open doors. My mama's two houses took skeleton keys on the doors as did my first two houses."

"Inside and outside?"

She waved a finger in front of Cat's nose. Cat withdrew into the depths of the sling. "Now that you mention it, mostly inside."

Although cars are handy, they're expensive. So I ride bicycles. My current model is a gray and black marbled mountain bike with twenty-one gears, click shifting, and a suspension system. Instead of panniers I have a yellow and red trail-

er, which is fortunate, as Cat would object to being stuffed in a pannier.

I put her in the trailer, wrapped her in the patchwork quilt that my ex-wife's grandmother had labored over, and pedaled the seven miles of bad roads to town.

It was a classic spring day, the kind that induces an ardent desire to do nothing of consequence. I wanted to head for the small tree-filled park in the common, plant my aging back against a budding maple, and smile at the world while working my way down a bottle of Lancers. But curiosity prevailed, so I looked up Donna Ogden's address in a graffiti-laden phone booth and headed for Taylor Street.

She lived in a long ranch house with yellow vinyl siding faded nearly white by the sun. On my fifth knock she pulled the door open and gave Cat and me the once-over with smiling brown eyes.

She was dressed in a burlap-colored sweatsuit and wore oversized slippers that looked like bear feet, complete with claws that hung over the threshold like thick white worms. Her brown hair was streaked with kinky strings of gray; she was about thirty pounds overweight, and I doubted she gave a damn. She stepped back, grinned, and said, "A leaned-out man and his mangy cat. This should be interesting."

I smiled and dipped my head. "Mrs. Ogden? My name is Harry Neal. Is your father in?"

"Harry Neal, my father is never out. My father has not been out for something like six goddamn months now."

I nodded again. "Is this voluntary or do you have him chained to the furnace?"

She smirked, pulled a pack of menthol cigarettes out of her pocket, fired one up, and said, "If you leave the cat upstairs with me, you can go see for yourself. Papa is allergic to the things." She turned and walked back into the house.

I followed her into a small living room filled with thirty-year-old furniture. She slumped in a misshapen black recliner, put her cigarette in a glass ashtray filled with smoldering butts, and held out her arms. I slipped Cat out of her sling and with some apprehension handed her over. "Please be gentle, she's rather fragile," I said.

"Rather," she said. "The poor thing looks like she's just been liberated from Dachau. The basement door is in the kitchen, to the right of the dishes."

I paused at a gray door to the right of several stacks of dirty dishes, then pulled it open and descended a staircase made of unfinished two by sixes. Past the furnace, sitting on bare cement, was a new-looking bright red recliner. An old man with a hatchet face and limp, shoulder-length gray hair was slumped in it in front of a huge black television. His left hand, which lay on his thigh, trembled badly. His right hand gripped a stopwatch. The television was off. The man's eyes were open.

I tapped him on the shoulder. "Mr. Kinch? My name is Harry Neal. I wonder if I may talk to you a moment. It concerns your old business partner, Bob Kokar."

He looked at me, looked at the stopwatch, licked his blue lips. "Maury comes on in three minutes and fifteen seconds."

I sighed, avoided looking at that trembling hand, said, "Mr. Kinch, do you remember your partner, Bob Kokar?"

His manic gray eyes never left the television. "Of course I do. I have Parkinson's, not Alzheimer's."

"Sorry. The day of his stroke, when you and Bob were doing inventory, he had the keys to a Chrysler-made vehicle. Would you happen to know why?"

"Cost you a dollar."

"What?"

"I said, cost you a dollar."

Jesus. I fished a dollar out of my pocket and dropped it in his lap. The spastic hand grabbed it and slowly crushed it into a little ball.

After a long silence I asked again, "Mr. Kinch, what was he doing with keys to a Chrysler car?"

"Because he was driving one that day. Had it parked by the loading dock."

"What kind of car was it?"

"A Chrysler-made vehicle."

"What kind of Chrysler-made vehicle?"

"Cost you a dollar."

I fished another dollar out of my pocket and dropped it in his lap.

"It was a 1976 Plymouth. Station wagon."

"Why was he driving that? Where was his Buick?"

"Cost you a dollar."

I dropped another dollar in his lap. I had three dollars left.

"Buick was at the garage with a flat tire. He was going to make a

delivery. The people who ordered the piece let him borrow their car."

I dropped a dollar in his lap. "Who were the people?"

The television came to life. The screen glowed, and an excited voice roared, "And only three flex payments of forty-nine ninety-five, so order now! Order now!"

"Mr. Kinch, who were the people with the Plymouth station wagon?"

He flapped that twitching hand at me. "Get out of here. Maury's on." And on the huge screen appeared a middle-aged man with a stewardess's grin and the eyes of an evangelist. Underneath in black letters I read *WOMEN WHO MARRY DWARFS*.

I stepped in front of the screen, leaned into his face, and said, "Who were the people with the station wagon?"

Mr. Kinch pushed at me with that spastic hand, leaned way to his left so he could see the screen, and hollered, "I don't know. I never saw them."

I dropped another dollar in his lap, leaned to my right, stared into his eyes, and hollered, "What was the piece? What did they order?"

Mr. Kinch frantically sat upright. "A chest, a big goddamn chest, like a pirate's treasure chest."

Mrs. Ogden was sitting in her recliner, a cigarette hanging out of her mouth and Cat nestled in her arms. She smiled at me. "He give you any trouble? I heard shouting."

"Not much. He was upset that I was causing him to miss the start of something called *The Maury Show*."

She smiled again. "How much?"  
"Five dollars."

She dipped into her sweatsuit, pulled out a damp looking fistful of balled-up bills, and counted off five. "Every time I go near the sonofabitch it costs me six or seven dollars, but I get them back when I do the wash."

I smiled sympathetically, eased Cat into her sling, and asked, "Do you remember any of the people who worked for Bob Kokar and your father? Any who are still around?"

Mrs. Ogden lit a fresh cigarette from the butt of her last one. "Cost you a dollar."

I dug in my pocket, found a faded, wrinkled dollar, and dropped it in her smoldering ashtray. She grinned. "You'll find C. C. Dorfman at the health club."

I said, "Thank you," and, as my dollar burst into flames, headed for the door.

There are two health clubs in town. The Muscle Stop, located in the old train station, and Blood Sweat and Black Iron, in the old town garage. I phoned The Muscle Stop, and an angry voice informed me that C. C. Dorfman owned Blood Sweat and Black Iron.

Thanks to a significant raise in taxes, the Public Works Department moved into a new garage four or five years ago, leaving a run-down building of gray cement and red brick. In a line along the front of the garage were four bay doors; stuck on the north end was an awkward looking two story barracks.

I pedaled across a gravel parking lot filled with pickup trucks and sport utility vehicles with tough sounding names and leaned the bike against the first bay door. A

confused jumble of noise came from inside the building, and I thought I heard someone scream. I put Cat in her sling and walked through a small door built into the first bay door.

And confronted primordial grunting, cries of exertion, weights crashing and banging, and rock-and-roll music screaming from large loudspeakers hanging by clotheslines from steel beams high above my head. The thick, humid air smelled of dirty socks and pizza.

Perhaps thirty people were working the weights. Blood Sweat and Black Iron was just what it said. No treadmills, stairsteppers, or other modern exercise gizmos, just free weights, I-beams with cables, and crude looking devices with discs of black iron hanging on them.

I must have appeared lost and confused, which was accurate, for a short bald man dressed in billowing red pants strutted up to me. He was muscle on muscle, almost as thick as he was tall, and his eyes spoke his devotion. He stared a moment at Cat, who was hanging half out of the sling taking everything in, looked at me, and raised his eyebrows.

I bent down and yelled in his ear, "I'm looking for C. C. Dorfman."

He pointed to the far end of the garage, gave Cat a last look, shook his head, and strutted back to a barbell with a massive amount of black iron hung on it.

Clutching Cat, I threaded my way through thousands of pounds of grunting, sweating, absurdly veined muscle to the other end of the garage and huddled in a corner,

wondering which one of the mutated creatures might be C. C. Dorfman.

Finally I approached a man who was lying on a bench with a loaded barbell above his chest and hollered, "Are you C. C. Dorfman?"

He laughed. "Don't very damn well think so," he yelled. "Try the one with the tits."

I looked to my left and saw a woman standing behind a barbell. She was my height, looked a young forty, and was dressed in drab gray Spandex shorts and halter. Her brown hair was cut very short, and like everyone else in the place she was superbly muscled with veins like rope and her face was a lesson in angles and hollows.

As I watched, she stooped, picked up the bar—which had at least a hundred pounds hung on it—and pushed it from her chest to as far above her head as she could reach. She did this fifteen times, then dropped the weight on the floor and did a series of stretches.

I walked over, gave her my friendliest smile and hollered, "Hello, my name is Harry Neal, could I talk with you for a moment?"

She gazed at me with placid, judging eyes, shrugged, and pointed to a small back door. I followed her out the door into a blissfully silent field of dead weeds and rocks.

Actually I walked, C. C. Dorfman strutted, her highly muscled hips undulating with a primitive sensuality that brought a silly, bemused smile to my face.

As she turned around, I whipped the smile off and said, "I'm a friend of Annie Kokar, and I'm trying to

trace Bob's movements on the day he had his stroke. I was talking to Philip Kinch and his daughter, and she said you were working at Kokar and Kinch that day."

She gazed at me, gave Cat a long searching look, and nodded. "Whew, that brings back some memories. You saw Kinch? How is the old bastard? Sometimes when I have five or six dollars to spare I pay him a visit, but I haven't been there in weeks. Frankly, he makes my ass tired."

"I'm not sure how he is. He sits in the basement and seems fixated on something called *The Maury Show*. It cost me five dollars to talk to him. He says he has Parkinson's. Do you remember the day Bob Kokar had his stroke?"

With long calloused fingers she slid Cat out of the sling and ran her other hand over Cat's body. "Car get her?"

I nodded. "Yes, it was touch and go for a bit, but Annie pulled her through. She's pretty gimpy but manages."

C. C. Dorfman nodded thoughtfully, squatted down, and laid Cat on her back in the weeds. She held Cat's body with one hand, grasped her bad front leg with the other, and, as she slowly, gently pulled it forward, asked, "So what's the interest in Bob's last normal day?"

"He was carrying some keys with him. Before he died, he hinted to Annie that they might lead to something of value. And he was driving another person's car, a 1976 Plymouth station wagon. Listen, what are you doing to Cat?"

Cat's eyes had suddenly bulged

and her purring turned to a drawn-out yowl. C. C. Dorfman now took both front legs and very slowly pulled them forward.

"She's extremely stiff. She needs to be stretched out daily. It'll reduce the scarring of the deep muscle tissue and increase her mobility. With increased mobility she'll be able to build up the atrophied muscle, reduce her discomfort and pain, and lead a better life. So stop screwing around, she's your responsibility, and you're not doing the work. Once a day minimum, stretch her out. If you're too damn lazy, give her to someone who will."

She laced the fingers of both hands in Cat's front and back legs and pulled. Cat yowled and looked at me with what I assumed to be pleading eyes. I put a hand on C. C. Dorfman's extremely muscular back and said, "I want you to stop, you're hurting her."

She stopped, flowed to a standing position, and looked at me with eyes gone fierce. "Listen, turkey, I know what I'm doing. I did three years of vet school at UNH and two summers with a vet in Hanover before I quit. I quit because every time I had to put an animal down, I cried and got drunk. My liver and wallet couldn't take it any more. So don't give me any crap, all right? I know what I'm doing." And she squatted down and put Cat on her digital rack again.

I pulled a dollar out of my pocket and let it float down to the grass. "Do you remember that '76 Plymouth wagon?"

She stopped torturing Cat, smiled, and tucked the dollar in her halter.



Her chest was so muscular that the inside edges of her breasts were striated. "I put a big chest into that car for Bob. He'd sold it to somebody, and when a tire on his Buick went flat, they lent him the station wagon. I was going to follow him to the person's house and give him a ride back. But then his face melted along with a lot of good stuff in his head, and that was that."

"So what happened to the car?"

She pressed her right thumb deep into Cat's neck muscles. I stood above her, my eyes wandering over her amazing body, and waited. Finally she said, "You know, this is the first time I've thought about it. And I've got a dollar that says Philip never remembered it either, until now I mean. So the answer to your question is, 'I haven't the faintest idea.'"

She put Cat on her left side and dug her fingers into Cat's scarred right shoulder. Cat was making noises that would break an executioner's heart; to distract her I threw another dollar down. "What does C. C. stand for?"

She rolled Cat over and started torturing her other shoulder. "It's not C. C., it's CeeCee, that's C-e-e, C-e-e, CeeCee." She lifted Cat, placed her in the sling, and gently rubbed the top of her head with a knuckle. "Remember, Neal, once a day minimum. If you don't, I'll find out about it and hunt you down and turn you into a gelding." And she not so gently rubbed the top of my head with several knuckles.

Gretchen's Restaurant is located at the gloomy, litter-strewn end of an alley off Main Street. A bowl

of her buck-a-bowl soup weighs about two pounds and keeps financially desperate senior citizens going until the green check comes. I spend a lot of time in Gretchen's, usually sitting alone in a booth that seats six, drinking wine or coffee and on occasion actually buying something to eat.

Gretchen is my age, has never ventured farther than Concord, thirty miles to the south, and could not care less about the human comedy outside the town limits. She does, however, know just about everything about the never-ending comedy outside her door.

I pushed open the heavy, peeling door with the front tire and rolled my bike down the narrow room to the back wall. It was fairly cold out, and the big potbellied stove was spewing out heat and wisps of birch-scented smoke that mixed with the aromas of chicken curry and good coffee.

I leaned the bike against the wall, put Cat in her sling, and, instead of taking the rear booth, walked to the counter and sat down next to the only person who knows more about the townspeople than Gretchen.

Betty Worthen, all hundred and sixty-some-odd pounds of her, is the only policewoman in town. She started out as, and still is, a meter maid; any arrests she makes are on foot and are the result of her own private investigations or an occasional push from a local. Betty and I owe each other some fairly significant favors and generally tolerate each other's numerous flaws.

Cat struggled out of the sling on-

to the counter and poked her nose in Betty's cup. After a few tentative sniffs she bent her head and lapped up coffee spiked with five or six teaspoons of sugar. Then she licked her nose and limped down the counter to check out what the other patrons had in front of them.

I stirred Betty's coffee with my finger just to watch her round face break into a grin, ordered my own coffee from one of Gretchen's geriatric waitresses, and said, "Were you around the day Bob Kokar had his stroke?"

Betty stared at her coffee a moment, then drank. "I was fresh out of the police academy, had just kicked my husband and son out of the house, and generally thought I was a hot ticket because I was single again and running around with a revolver on my hip and putting parking tickets on people's windshields. It was Kokar's stroke that brought me back to earth. I was the first official type to get to the store. I heard crying and ran in to the back and there's old Philip Kinch and CeeCee Dorfman on the floor holding Kokar. His face had sagged like warm taffy, and he stared up at me with the eyes of a gutshot doe. I was about as helpful as Philip and generally stood around with my thumb up my butt watching him drool."

I pulled out the keys, laid them on the counter, and gave Betty the short version of what I'd been doing.

She moved the keys around with a finger, gave me a side-eyed look, and said, "Glad to hear of your reprieve. I was worried about you living in Teller's Hotel, sitting in one

of those musty old rooms drinking yourself to death. I'd feel just a little guilty because I was the one who arrested Duncan, thanks to you.

"As for that station wagon, I can't do anything for you. There'd be no reason for the DMV to keep any records this long, so where would I start? If I were you, I'd ask Philip where the store records are. Maybe you'll get lucky and they're still around. Then you can hunt up the bill of sale for that chest and find out who bought it. Odds are, they're the ones who came down and drove off in that wagon with it."

As I coasted into the barnyard, I noticed that Annie's kitchen window was open. I pulled up to the house, leaned against the window, and said to Annie's back, "Did Bob ever mention a chest he sold that day?"

Annie jerked and dropped a cast-iron skillet on the floor. She stepped over the skillet, which was oozing gray, thick liquid, and said, "Next time knock. A chest? I don't believe so. Is it important?"

"That day, the day of his first stroke, he was going to deliver a chest to someone. Apparently it resembled the classic treasure chest. His Buick had a flat tire, so the someone lent him a car. It was a '76 Plymouth station wagon."

She frowned. "So the Chrysler keys are to the station wagon, and the smaller key could be to the chest. Which means he was babbling when he said they were the keys to my dream. What he might have meant was that he had a key to a chest like a hope chest."

"Possibly," I said. "There are still

a couple of things I'm going to check on, but I wouldn't count on going to Key West next winter."

"I won't plan on it." She stared at me a moment, gave me a thin smile, and said, "You've got a bit of a gleam in your eye."

"Your reprieve has swept the acidic fog from my mind and replaced it with mild euphoria."

She nodded and got down on her hands and knees to clean up the mess on the floor. "Well, Harry, as I said, you've been good to The Farm, and after a bit of rational thought I realized it would be ludicrous to punish you for doing what you thought was right."

I watched her a moment. "What I've been wondering is, did you really come to that decision yesterday? Or did you plan on letting me stay weeks ago and allowed me to suffer for a while as punishment?"

She slowly raised her head and gave me a heavy-lidded look and a smile that would curdle icewater. We stared at each other for several seconds; then she bent her head to her task, and I left the window and pedaled to the boat.

After supper I spent an hour or so unpacking, then, with Cat snuggled in my lap, sat in the settee with a mug of wine and looked out the window at the grove.

My grove.

After breakfast the next morning I finished unpacking and decided to start Cat on her daily stretches. CeeCee Dorfman was undoubtedly right. I spend twenty or thirty minutes a day stretching, and it made sense that Cat, as handicapped as

she was, would also benefit from a daily workout.

I put her on her back in the middle of the cabin, gently took her front legs and pulled them over her head. She yeowled, struggled to her feet, gave me a shocked look and a squeaky little hiss.

I petted her for a bit, massaged her scar tissue, and tried again. As soon as I started pulling on her legs, she yeowled, lurched to her feet, and, paw raised, claws extended, gave that squeaky little hiss and limped into her nest under the cockpit.

Apparently my technique was just a tad off.

I spent ten minutes on my hands and knees with my head in the berth staring into Cat's dilated eyes and spewing forth a lot of pleading nonsense. Finally I reestablished a semblance of trust, got her bundled up in the trailer, and headed to town. I didn't want to play Talking for Dollars with Philip Kinch again, so I pedaled to Blood Sweat and Black Iron.

The parking lot was empty except for a rust-spotted maroon van with a black iron weight painted on the driver's door. I leaned the bike against crumbling brick, put Cat in her sling, and pulled on the small door built into the first bay door.

It was locked. I stood there a moment, looked at the van, then slapped the door several times with the flat of my hand. I waited a few moments, then smacked it again.

The door opened suddenly, and CeeCee Dorfman said, "The door to my apartment is around back, up the stairway."

She was dressed in jeans and a tight yellow T-shirt and was barefoot and braless. She also looked pale, bleary-eyed, and not exactly delighted to see me. I pasted a smile on my face. "I apologize. Am I interrupting something or may I come in?"

She gave Cat a quick knuckle rub and stepped back. "Come on up. I'll spot you a cup of coffee and a glass of CeeCee Dorfman's Magic Stuff."

I followed her into the garage, through a silent dark forest of black iron to an open red door marked PRIVATE in white letters. We climbed narrow stairs, turned right, and entered a large room that was half kitchen, half living room.

The kitchen part was dominated by a commercial gas stove with eight burners and a large grill. She pointed at an unpainted picnic table squatting in front of the stove, and I pulled out a bench and perched on it. Cat immediately hauled herself out of the sling, climbed on the table, sat by a restaurant napkin holder, and stared at CeeCee Dorfman.

CeeCee gave me a mug of steaming coffee and set an empty glass next to it. From a large blender she poured a thick purple liquid into the glass. "My Magic Stuff. One quart would keep half a Mongol horde raping and pillaging for a week." She sat next to me, smiled, and said, "So why the visit? You want to join up? Become a bodybuilder? Or do you just want to hang around and stare at my boobs?"

"I'm too old for the former and too reserved for the latter. I came to see you for two reasons. One, I'd like to

hire you to stretch and massage Cat. This morning I tried and hurt her, and she got mad at me. If I keep it up, I'll lose her trust. I also want to ask you if you happen to know what happened to Kinch and Kokar's records, especially the bills of sale."

She plucked Cat off the table and scratched her ears. "You're still dogging that car?"

"Not compulsively, not like you dog weights. But I would like to find out who bought the chest. Perhaps they can shed light on Annie's puzzle."

She pursed her lips and nodded. I tried her Magic Stuff. It was thick, smelled like vanilla, and tasted like overripe bananas and malt. I took several gulps and followed it with a few sips of excellent coffee.

"Actually, I do know where K and K's papers might be. After Bob stroked, Philip just barely hung on. Bob was the businessman and kept everything going. Philip was the salesman, liked to gab with the customers and couldn't care less about the rest of it. After Bob had his second stroke and it was obvious he was heading out, we had a going-out-of-business sale and then Philip sold the building to the Catholic Church."

"And the Catholics turned it into a center for senior citizens."

"That they did, but originally, before it was K and K Furniture, it was Osborn's Restaurant. From what Bob said, the place was very popular for several years; then Mrs. Osborn was diagnosed with cervical cancer, fought the good fight, and croaked. Mr. Osborn was devastat-

ed, sold the place to Bob and Philip for a song, and the rest you know."

"So where are the records?"

With a small, twisted smile on her face she stared at me. When I didn't say anything, she tapped me lightly in the middle of my forehead and whispered, "Turn on your lights, Neal, or is your battery getting low?"

I finished the Magic Stuff. "The records are still in the building."

"They *may* still be in the building, down in the basement, in the old walk-in cooler. After Bob had his stroke, I did all the bookkeeping, and when the joint was sold, I gave copies of everything to the tax people and the state. But if the nuns didn't hoe the place out, the original paper is still there."

"You don't remember any bill of sale for that chest?"

"It probably crossed the desk, but it wouldn't have rung any bells. As for Cat, I'll do her four times a week. In return I'd like you to join Blood Sweat and Black Iron for a year. I'll only charge you half, three hundred."

"Surely you jest."

"I jest not, and don't call me Shirley."

"I'm sixty-three. Your proposition is ludicrous."

She smiled, shrugged, and said, "You're a very good sixty-three, and after a year doing weights you'd be a fabulous sixty-three, but it's your choice. I don't open the place until two. Bring Cat by any morning. I'll charge you a pound of coffee for four sessions a week."

"Thank you." I reached for Cat. "I'm going to go to the senior center and peek into that walk-in."

"Leave Cat here. As soon as I gulp down some more caffeine, I'll stretch her out. But I gotta do the caffeine first. I was up until three watching a Xena festival on cable."

"A Xena festival?"

"Xena, the kick-butt warrior princess, you dolt. She's my role model."

With Cat gripped in CeeCee Dorfman's thick arms, I left. Cat wasn't happy with the situation, and I could hear plaintive meows as I closed the door and headed down the outside stairway. Half-way down I turned around, went back up, opened the door, and said, "Don't give her any milk or cream; it wreaks havoc with her digestive system."

CeeCee Dorfman looked up from petting Cat and smiled. "Got it. No cream. No milk. See ya later."

Again I started downstairs and again turned around, went back up, and opened the door. But before I could speak, CeeCee pointed a finger at me. "Neal, get a grip and get out."

After stopping briefly at Krieb's Hardware, I pedaled to the senior center. The parishioners were obviously putting their drachmas somewhere besides the collection box, for the center needed paint and more than a few new clapboards. The parking lot looked like a tank platoon had been using it for maneuvers, and I didn't see anyplace to lock my bicycle.

I pushed bike and trailer up two wood steps, pulled open one of the big entrance doors, and managed to get everything inside without damage or mishap. I stood in a wide, short hall and looked into a room

the approximate size of a high school basketball court.

People were milling about or sitting in a strange collection of recliners and easy chairs, reading. A sizable group was seated in a semicircle around a big television set watching a movie. The movie was in black and white, and all the men wore suits and hats and all the women were smiling.

Outside of a nun dressed in traditional garb I was probably the youngest person in the building. I leaned the bike against the inside wall and strolled into the main room. Trying to look Catholic and casual, I scanned the place for a likely looking door to the basement.

To my left was an island of overstuffed chairs and a couch. Most of the chairs were filled with shapeless, doughy-faced people with white hair, and most of them were sleeping. And sitting on the sunken, torn, leather couch, her arm around a sobbing woman with very thin white hair, was Mildred Beede.

She saw me and gestured, so I walked over to the couch and raised my eyebrows.

She nodded at the sobbing woman beside her. "I'm a volunteer. Twice a week I drive in and help Sister Marie run the center. This place is open to all seniors, and they're short-handed and welcome any help they can get, even from an old Baptist like me."

Her smile pushed her crinkled face into an overlapping series of semicircles. "The real surprise is seeing you. What game induces you to enter this Christian stronghold?"

"I was in the neighborhood and

thought I'd drop in. I must have passed this place a million times and I . . ."

"Harry Neal, a Catholic-run senior center is the last place on earth you would visit voluntarily, so please don't insult what little intelligence I still possess by feeding me one of your I-just-happened-to lines."

"Well, I will admit to a certain mercenary bent to my visit."

The sobbing woman patted Mildred's hand, mumbled, "Thank you," gave me a wet, red-eyed glance, and shuffled away. Mildred slumped against the back of the couch, sighed, and said, "Life is truly a harsh mistress, Harry."

"To quote Annie misquoting Thomas Hobbes, 'Life is nasty, brutal, and short.' He wasn't, but he could have been referring to the winter of one's life."

Mildred sighed again. "A certain mercenary bent?"

"In the basement of this building is an old walk-in cooler. It's possible that some records I would like to look at are still in that cooler."

Mildred stared at me a moment, then snorted. "I suspect, Harry, that you will have a lot to answer for when you are dragged before the gods." She dug a clawlike hand into my shoulder for support and stood. "Why don't I show you where the bathrooms are? By coincidence the basement door is just a few steps beyond the men's room."

Side by side, we strolled across the room, weaving through a mixed bag of men and women for whom sixty was young. As I glanced at them, a sharp-edged stone of gloom



grew in my consciousness. A few scant years up the road and I might be slumped in one of those recliners drooling on my shirt.

We came to a wood door that appeared to have trench foot. Mildred opened it and motioned me into a dim hall cluttered with stacks of folding chairs, cardtables, and two broken couches. She pointed to the end of the hall and whispered, "The key is above the door, the walk-in is near the front, on the north side. But don't get your hopes up. The basement has always been empty 'cause of all the water." She went back into the main room.

I walked down to the end of the hall and stood in front of a peeling, dirt-streaked door. I ran my hand along the sill and found a skeleton key much like the one on Bob Kokar's key ring. I unlocked the door, turned the rusty knob, and fumbled for the light switch.

I went down solid, dirty stairs into a large cement room and walked along the north wall toward the front of the building. Except for a rumbling, foul-smelling furnace and several stagnant pools of black water, the basement was empty. Near the front, embedded in the cement block wall, was a thick, wood-faced door with a large metal handle.

I gripped the handle and yanked. Groaning like a sick animal, the big door opened, and I looked into a musty, foul-smelling blackness that spoke of mold, fungus, and dangerous microbes. I found a light switch, and an encrusted twenty-five watt bulb revealed a small filthy room with wet and corroded metal walls and a damp looking wood floor.

Taking a deep breath, I carefully stepped in and immediately punched through the wood, going ankle deep before hitting cement slab. I took another step and punched through again. With both feet through the wood I squinted and looked around the room.

Except for a row of dirt-covered metal boxes stacked two high, the walk-in was empty.

Breaking through the wood floor with each step, I struggled to the boxes. I put on my Wal-Mart reading glasses and pulled out my brand-new overpriced penlight. Turning it on, I knelt and squinted at the faded labels in metal slots in the middle of each box.

Barely discernible in neat, hand-printed letters was the name Kinch and Kokar, and below the name was a date. Each box seemed to hold a year's worth of paper. Crabbing along, I scrolled through the years until I came to a rusted box that should have contained paper from that fateful day.

Pulling it off the stack, I lugged it out of the walk-in and headed for the dank halo of light created by a lone bulb hanging over the furnace. Halfway across the floor the bottom of the box gave way, and forty pounds of paper fell on my feet.

I sat on the floor next to the mess and held my toes while contemplating the infinite number of things I'd rather be doing. When the pain subsided to a tolerable level, I got on my knees and started pawing through the stuff.

Another year and it would have been too late. The bulk of the papers were black with mold and had

a damp, clammy feel. Several thick bundles were stuck together, and when I attempted to peel them apart, they turned to mush in my hands. Kneeling on the wet cement floor I went through what papers I could salvage. It was like working an archaeological dig—ever so carefully teasing apart moldy, moist paper and peering at faded scribbles.

I got lucky.

I threw what remained of the box and the rotting piles of paper back into the walk-in, slammed the door, and made my way back to the big room upstairs.

Surrounded by snoring elders, Mildred was sitting alone on the couch reading last Tuesday's *Boston Globe*. I sat beside her, and she looked at me, smiled, pulled a lace-trimmed handkerchief out of her dress pocket, and wiped my face. "So, Harry, was your trip to the dungeon successful?"

"Would you happen to know an Elinor Obermeyer?"

Her face turned stern, and her voice was suddenly rimmed with flint. "Harry Neal, Elinor Obermeyer is a kind woman who is as innocent now as she was the day she was born. She and Milt are one of the nicest couples I know."

"All I asked was, do you know her."

"And I know you, Harry. You're up to something. You're on the scent. The only thing Elinor and Milt have ever done is be nice, so leave them alone."

I stared at her a moment. "And just what is it that qualifies Elinor and Milt for sainthood?"

"Don't be flip with me, Harry. I didn't say they were saints, I simply stated that they were nice people. They've had their share of troubles over the years and don't need an old ferret like you to come sniffing around their burrow."

"What kind of troubles?"

"Well, quite a few years ago Elinor's brother was killed in a car accident in Connecticut just a week after he moved there. I had attended a going-away party she and Milt held for him. He was a professor at the college and had gotten a nice offer from a Connecticut university. Elinor was devastated.

"And they're in poor health. Sometimes I used to see them around town or having lunch at Gretchen's, and I sometimes see her at church, but not lately, she finds it so hard to move around. They're both quite . . . overweight and frail."

"You, in church? I thought you were a backsliding Baptist."

"I am. And I'm here to tell you the services can be more than a trifle irritating. It's hard to understand how adults can believe that stuff. It's what's after the services that I sometimes enjoy. The coffee and doughnuts in the church basement. I get to talk and mingle with people, and I've made some new friends by my hypocrisy."

"I don't think you could be labeled a hypocrite, Mildred, just a bit devious." I stood, touched her shoulder, and said, "Thanks for your help. Without it I'd still be wandering around looking for the basement door."

"Buy me a drink sometime and

tell me what you're up to. Your forays into other people's lives are more interesting than coffee and doughnuts in a church basement. And do leave the Obermeyers alone."

I pounded on CeeCee Dorfman's door, heard her yell, and walked in. She was reclining on a battered futon with Cat stretched out on her stomach, watching television. Cat looked up, opened her mouth, licked her gums, and limped toward me. I took the sling off the picnic table, put it on, and picked her up. She opened her mouth and licked her gums several times, then pawed at my chest and slithered into the sling.

CeeCee Dorfman was watching a tape of a superbly muscled black woman dressed in a white bikini lecturing on nutritional supplements. I watched a moment, then said, "Do you happen to remember Elinor and Milt Obermeyer?"

Without looking up she said, "Sure, nice old couple, both about forty pounds overweight and haven't got a muscle between them. When K and K was open, they bought a bunch of stuff. Spent a ton of money. Actually I think it was Rabart's money."

"They also bought that chest you put in the station wagon the day of Bob Kokar's stroke," I said. Cat kept opening her mouth and licking her chops. I watched her a moment. "Who's Rabart? And what did you do to Cat's mouth?"

"Rabart is—was Elinor's brother. He was killed in a car accident in Connecticut. It's his house that Milt and Elinor live in. It's now their

house, of course. They bought a lot of furniture for it."

She stopped talking and focused on the woman, who was flexing her arms and chattering on about proteins. "Cat?" I prompted.

She aimed a remote at the television, which went black.

"I brushed her teeth. It should be done at least three times a week." She flowed off the futon, picked a bag off the picnic table, and waved it at me. "This is her food from now on. Feed her this and only this. No table scraps, no human tuna, no crap."

*"You brushed her teeth?"*

She plucked a toothbrush out of the kitchen sink. "Three times a week. And don't use any fancy toothpaste, just basic stuff. If you don't want to do it, I'll do it when you bring her here. Any morning. But make it before two, that's when I open up."

At the sight of the toothbrush Cat slid out of the sling, hit the floor, and, moving faster than I'd ever seen her move, hobbled over to the stove and crawled under it. I stared at the stove, gave CeeCee my tough look, which made her grin, and said, *"You brushed her teeth?"*

I leaned the bike against the back wall and sat in the last booth. Cat pulled herself out of the sling, perched by the napkin holder, and stared at Gretchen. The place was as quiet as a foggy night, with just the gentle whisper of gray voices mingled with an occasional clink of spoon on bowl.

Gretchen put a chilled mug and a carafe of red wine on the table

and slid into the opposite seat. As I poured the wine, she pulled a long pink cigarette out of her pocket and lit it with a hissing lighter. She blew smoke past my right shoulder and pulled a piece of beef out of her other pocket.

CeeCee Dorfman's stinging lecture on why cats should have their teeth brushed and why they should never eat table scraps still hummed in my brain, but I couldn't break up what had become a cherished ritual and told myself that just these times with Gretchen would be okay.

Cat pounced on the beef, shook it, dropped it, and attacked it again before dragging it to the napkin holder, where she put her good front paw on it and looked around the room with narrowed eyes. As she always did, Gretchen smiled and gently pulled Cat's good ear. I drank, set my mug down, and asked, "How well do you know the Obermeyers?"

"Milt and Elinor? Pretty good. They used ta come in here all the time when they were stronger."

"I know a woman who thinks they're candidates for sainthood."

She raised her eyebrows. "Nice is the word for them. Always polite, always inquiring after your health and such, and anyone will tell you what nice damn people they are. But the thing I noticed was, someone else always seemed to pay their way, usually her brother Gordon. When he died down in Connecticut, they got his money and the house, so I guess he's still paying."

"Gordon Rabart," I said.

"Yep. Milt worked for a bit at Kreb's Hardware back when it was Mill's Hardware. And Peter Mill

used ta call him Flash Obermeyer 'cause Milt moved about as fast as your average snail. But he didn't last but five or six years. I guess it was easier ta live off of Rabart. As far as I know, Elinor never worked a day in her life."

"So they always lived in Rabart's house."

"Yep. Milt sure didn't make enough working at Mill's to keep a house and all that."

"Rabart paid their way?"

"Yep."

"Then he got killed."

"Yep."

"And then it was Milt and Elinor's house."

"Yep, along with a bunch of dollars. Gordon Rabart was an economics professor and practiced what he preached. Rumor had it he made a fair dollar playing the market."

I pedaled through a cold light rain to The Farm. The wide, knobby tires made a muted hissing sound that lulled me into a trance and the trip seemed short, but when I reached the boat, it was dark and I was cold and irritated.

I got a fire going, fixed myself a plate of stir-fries, and washed them down with a half bottle of Lancers. By the time I finished eating, Cat was giving me meaningful looks and batting her bowl around the floor. So I opened up a box of CeeCee Dorfman's special food, poured some in Cat's bowl, and held my breath.

Cat sniffed at the stuff, which looked like large mouse turds, looked at me, sniffed again, and hunkered down and ate with gusto. Relieved, I poured another mug

of Lancers, settled back in the settee, and thought about keys and chests and Gordon Rabart.

Wrapped in a maroon Gore-Tex rainsuit, and with the trailer's canvas hood zipped up, I pedaled through a driving rain to town. By the time I reached the common my system was begging for hot caffeine, but discipline prevailed and I locked the bike to a steel railing, put the rainsuit in the trailer, and slipped Cat inside my sweatjacket. Head bent into the rain, I trotted across a wide brick walk to the college library.

Fortunately, the front desk was manned by an inattentive coed chatting on the phone. Acting calm and casual I strolled by the desk and ducked into the reference stacks. Slinking from aisle to aisle like a hunted rabbit, I circled around the reference desk, which was manned with manic intensity by one Gloria Somerville, an excellent researcher but hell on illiterate felines.

Safely past Reference, I skulked across two open aisles and, without knocking, burst through a door marked DR. JEREMY HANSON, STUDENT GUIDANCE COUNSELOR.

Before I dropped out of the world, I was a card-carrying member of the college faculty, and Jeremy and I often refought wars, censured world leaders, and reformed the planet while drinking large quantities of cheap wine.

When I burst through his door, his head jerked up from a computer screen. He looked at my dripping face and grinned. "Ah, 'tis Professor Neal seeking refuge from his

quixotic ventures, obviously ready to humble himself and slather his mentor with profuse apologies for being such an existential ass."

Jeremy is a year older than me, looks it, and would have achieved greatness if not blocked by numerous dysfunctions, one of which is a fondness for Johnny Walker Red. I sat in the one chair across from his tiny desk, nodded at his computer, and asked, "Can you get the University of Connecticut on that thing?"

Still smiling, he turned back to the screen, tapped on his keyboard for maybe twenty seconds, sat back, and said, "Now what?"

"Seventeen years ago Gordon Rabart, professor of economics, quit his post here for a job at UConn. A week after he arrived, he was killed in an auto accident. I'm curious about what, if anything, they might have on record."

Jeremy's eyebrows rose as his smile faded. He rubbed his face and said softly, "I remember, I went to his going-away party. When I tried to leave with a bottle of champagne, Elinor, his sister, waylaid me and made me return the bottle. The bitch."

He turned to the computer and for the next fifteen minutes either tapped away or watched lines of type scroll up the screen. Finally he went "Aha," leaned back with his hands behind his head, and watched the screen.

Then, his face an empty mask, he turned to me and in a near whisper said, "According to Dr. Franklin Shaw, who has been in the UConn economics department for twenty-

two years, Dr. Gordon Rabart never showed up for faculty indoctrination—his sister called and said he was killed in an auto accident just outside his hometown in central New Hampshire.”

“Interesting.”

“Yes, very. I must say, Harry, that is one damp and seedy looking cat you have there.”

I looked down. Cat had stuck her scarred head out of the jacket and was checking out the office. I stood. “Thank you, Jeremy, I appreciate your time.”

“Harry, think back to those golden days of yesteryear and remember the good times we had. And now if we tip the glass once a year I consider it lucky. We’re friends, Harry. Just because you turned left at life’s fork doesn’t mean you have to forfeit your friends.”

CeeCee Dorfman, dressed in threadbare jeans and a tight white sweatshirt with large red hands printed over her breasts, opened the door. “Come in out of the rain, Neal, before you get a terminal case of Wet Brain.”

I dropped my coat on the floor under the picnic table and sat down, put fifty dollars on the table and said, “This is for the food and therapy. When you want more, let me know.”

She shrugged, put a cup of coffee and an empty glass in front of me, filled the glass with Magic Stuff from the ever-present blender, grabbed Cat, and hauled her out of the sling. With a piece of towel she rubbed her down, then pried open her mouth and smelled her breath.

“I’ll be damned. You’re actually feeding her the food I gave you.”

“Of course. Miss Dorfman, would you mind if I left Cat with you for a while? I have a few things I’d like to do, and it would be easier if Cat weren’t along.”

CeeCee nodded. “No problem. I’ll give her her workout and feed her a dish of the Good Stuff, and then we’ll lie back and watch a couple of hours of Xena, butt-kicking warrior princess. And if you ever call me Miss Dorfman again, I’ll kick you in the cahunas.”

“This Xena is on all day?”

“I have a bunch of Xena tapes.”

“Why don’t you turn off the television and live your own adventures?”

“Why don’t you piss up a rope?”

With Miss Dorfman’s Magic Stuff gurgling in my stomach I pushed open the door to Gretchen’s, walked the creaking floor to the back, and leaned the bike against the wall. As I walked back to the front door, I smiled at Gretchen and said, “I’ll pick it up later.” She waved a greasy spatula at me and nodded.

Milt and Elinor Obermeyer had inherited a large Victorian house complete with turrets and wrap-around porch. The muted shades of brown looked like they had been brushed on yesterday, and the flagstone walk was a study in spatial relations. A blacktop driveway ended at the back of the house, and parked just beyond the porch was a new looking Plymouth Caravan.

I walked across the porch and pushed a gold button to the left of the oak door. After a few moments I pushed the button again, waited



a decent interval, then beat the door with the butt of my hand. Finally the door swung inward a few inches, and a white head peeked around the edge just above the knob.

Elinor Obermeyer's face was round and pink and marred by thick hornrimmed glasses. Her cap of curly white hair looked like it had been carved by a very good artisan, and the rings on the fingers gripping the edge of the door could keep Cat in sushi for all of her mythical nine lives.

I bobbed my head, smiled my best smile, and said, "Mrs. Obermeyer? My name is Harry Neal. I wonder if I may speak to you and your husband for a few moments. It pertains to the 1976 Plymouth station wagon you used to own."

Her eyes widened behind the thick lenses. She stared at me a few moments, then opened the door and straightened up. "Why, that vehicle was wrecked years ago. What possible interest could it have for you, Mr. Neal?"

"Well, it's a rather odd story involving Kinch and Kokar Furniture and the chest you bought from them."

That got me another minute of silent appraisal. Finally she cleared her throat and said softly, "I see. Well, perhaps you'd better come in." She turned and with a shuffling waddle led me into the house. "Would you care for a cup of tea? Or perhaps a glass of sherry?"

"A glass of sherry would be nice," I said.

I slowly followed her through a music room dominated by a grand piano and three loveseats, past a

curving staircase, and through an arched portal into a large, opulent living room. To the right, beyond the living room, was a formal dining room. Elinor motioned toward a pale blue wing chair by the fireplace.

She wore a full length dress of subdued red that swished when she walked. I sat, hoping to hell I didn't have any bicycle grease on my pants, and accepted the small glass of sherry she held out to me.

She swished over to a white couch with blue flowers embroidered on it, and sat down. "Milton is taking his bath, and as he is just getting over a bad cold, I don't want to rush him. Now, you say you are here about our old station wagon and a chest we bought?"

I took a minuscule sip of the sherry. "The day you purchased the chest from Kinch and Kokar, Bob Kokar's car was in the garage, and you lent him your station wagon so he could deliver the chest to this residence. Before he could do so, however, he suffered a stroke and was taken to the hospital. Because of the crisis the station wagon was forgotten." I took another sip of my sherry and stared unsmiling at Elinor.

Pulling at the fabric of her dress with hands mottled with brown and purple splotches, she stared wide-eyed at me. Finally, in a low voice she said, "The chest was a present for my late brother Gordon. He was moving to Connecticut the next morning. When Mr. Kokar failed to deliver the chest by late afternoon, I called the store and learned of his accident. I walked to the store and retrieved the car and

the chest and drove home. Gordon packed the chest and early the next morning drove down to the University of Connecticut."

"And a week later died in a car accident."

Her eyes glistened behind the glasses. She nodded slowly, "Yes. We—we couldn't believe it. Even now, Mr. Neal, after all these years, I still can't comprehend what happened. It was devastating."

"And he was driving the station wagon when he had the accident?"

She nodded slowly again. "Yes, even at the time it was an old vehicle, but Gordon said it was still very functional and wouldn't trade it in. When the Connecticut police called, they said he went off the road during a heavy rain and hit a tree. They said he probably died instantly. May I inquire why you are asking questions after all these years?"

"Bob Kokar's wife Annie recently discovered the set of car keys you gave him. They were lying in a drawer, forgotten all this time. She remembered that Bob had mentioned leaving his coat in the car. It was one she had given him on their fortieth anniversary, and she asked me to seek you out and inquire after the car on the very slim chance the coat could be located. Apparently it was a strong symbol of their love." I pasted a smarmy smile on my face, downed the sherry, and wished for more. Lying is thirsty work.

Her pink, flaccid face molded into her version of a sympathetic look. "I don't remember any coat. I think Gordon would have mentioned finding it, and surely he would have

found it while packing the car."

I stood and placed my glass on the small table beside her. "I'm sure you're right, Mrs. Obermeyer. Annie undoubtedly has it tucked away somewhere, like the keys to Gordon's station wagon. Someday she'll clean out a closet and there it will be. I'm sorry to have awakened such unpleasant memories."

She struggled to her feet. "Don't fret, Mr. Neal. There is not a day goes by that I don't think of dear Gordon. And I'm sure you're right, someday Mrs. Kokar will find that coat hidden in the back of a closet and she will have fond memories to dwell on."

"Thank you for your time and say hello to your husband for me."

She beamed at me. "It was no trouble at all, Mr. Neal. You may see yourself out, it's getting to be quite a trek to the front door."

I nodded, smiled like an idiot, said, "Thank you," one more time, and headed for the door.

I stopped at the door, took three quick steps backward, and looked toward the living room. Elinor was shuffling through the dining room toward the rear of the house. I opened the front door, closed it hard, and hurried to the stairs. With one hand clamped on the polished oak banister, I watched Elinor disappear through a swinging door, presumably into the kitchen.

Probably looking like a cartoon version of a burglar, I darted through the living room into the dining room and hurried through the dining room to an open doorway into a short hall painted gloss-white. Across from a wall phone

was a door. Clenching my teeth, I slowly turned the knob, pulled it open, and stared at shelves of what I assumed to be The Good China. I closed the door, crept to the other end of the hall, and put an ear to a door with at least five coats of high-gloss white paint on it.

Hearing nothing, I eased the door open and entered a pantry crowded with condiments, a toaster, coffee-maker, two other doors, and silence. I could hear water running and Elinor humming a tuneless ditty on the other side of the left-hand door. With infinite caution I turned the knob of the right-hand door, inch by inch eased it open, and stared down a flight of steep, dirty stairs.

Trembling like a veteran wino, I pulled the key ring out of my pocket and tried to get the skeleton key into the damned keyhole. I finally made it, took a deep breath, and tried the key.

It wouldn't turn.

Jamming the key ring back in my pocket, I retraced my steps as fast as I dared. Quick-walking into the music room, I grabbed the gleaming banister and, taking them three at a time, lurched up the stairs. At the top I stepped onto lush pale gray carpeting and looked down a long hallway with cream-colored wallpaper and numerous doorways. I took a deep breath, and started down the hall. Looking into the first doorway on my left I saw a large bedroom with a huge canopied bed and about ninety square yards of pink.

Across the hall was a smaller bedroom with a single brass bed, a dark bureau, a gray wing chair,

and two endtables cluttered with magazines. I turned, heard a coughing, grunting noise, and jumped into the pink bedroom.

Mumbling and snorting like an old bear shuffling through a cornfield, someone came up the hallway, hesitated, then walked into the bedroom across the hall. Blinking sweat out of my eyes, I peeked around the door jamb and stared at the wide back of an old man with a fat, bulbous neck and a frizzy band of gray hair over his ears. He wore a red and white striped bathrobe and was methodically placing soap dish, razor, and other pieces of bath paraphernalia on top of the bureau.

My eyes nailed to the man's neck, I stepped out of the pink bedroom and, taking giant strides on tiptoe, got the hell down the hall.

I scooted past a bathroom with a black and white checkerboard floor, wafting out moist fumes of after-shave, and crept down three stairs to a closed door. I opened the door and looked into a small, square bedroom in which all the furniture was covered with sheets. I closed the door and started down the hall again, stopped, and went back and entered the room.

I carefully closed the door, crept between two single beds, and faced two doors very close together.

Behind the first door was an empty closet. I opened the second and looked up narrow, dusty stairs. Taking the key ring out of my pocket, I fumbled the skeleton key into the lock and turned it. As I did so, a thick steel bolt slid out of the door and with a soft *snick* locked in place. I almost giggled.

The attic was a dark, musty confusion of still shadows and primitive silence. One small window cast a murky shaft of light down a narrow aisle between stacks of boxes and trunks. In slow motion, every creak of the sagging floorboards sounding like a gunshot, I made my way down the aisle to the dust-caked window and scratched at the encrusted glass with a fingernail.

Well beyond a back yard layered with last fall's leaves, the roof of a shed or garage peeked over the top of a thick nest of spindly maples and high brush that hadn't been trimmed since Hector was a pup.

It would have taken twenty minutes with a putty knife to scrape off the encrusted grime on the window. I gave up on the idea of more sunlight and pulled out my overpriced penlight.

Crawling down the aisle on my hands and knees, I examined the trunks. At the end of the aisle, near the stairs, I found a wall of boxes stacked four high, lifted sheets, and peered at old leather chairs, a desk, and a dried-up leather sofa.

Apparently the Obermeyers didn't care for Gordon's taste in furniture.

I finally found it tucked in a dark corner covered by a gray wool blanket and surrounded by boxes full of plain, functional china and several decades' worth of *The Journal of Applied Economics*.

And it did indeed look like the movie version of a pirate's treasure chest except it was perhaps twice as large and the brass trim looked suspiciously like aluminum. Every move carefully choreographed, I

cleared a path through the boxes and, teeth clenched, slowly, ever so slowly, moved the chest away from the corner timbers.

Again I pulled out the key ring, wiped the sweat off my face, and with a fairly steady hand inserted the brass key into the chest.

It turned easily. The penlight between my teeth, I lifted the domed lid until it was fully open and resting on the large hinges.

It was stained and mottled black, probably from fats and fluids and perhaps fungus, and it fell apart at my touch. But there was enough of the original to make out some of the letters. Gordon Rabart had died with his new University of Connecticut sweatshirt on.

I looked down at the jumble of clothes and bones, took a deep breath, and with one finger started poking and pulling at the clothing and pushing at the bones.

And found several ribs with gouges in them. Something had gone through Gordon Rabart, doing terrible, lethal damage in the process.

Slowly, carefully, I closed the lid and, again thinking through every move before I made it, replaced the chest and boxes as I had found them, covered the chest with the dust-heavy blanket, and made my way down those narrow stairs.

I was halfway down the main stairway before I realized Elinor and Milt were having drinks in the music room. I turned around and, with teeth clenched so hard my ears were ringing, crept back up the stairs. Their mumbling, mingled with the occasional clink of bottle on glass, was indistinct. Perhaps I should go

down, help myself to some sherry, plant my tired butt on a loveseat, and join the conversation. "I say, El-inor, which one of you did Gordon? And why? Why on earth kill your own brother? The brother who was so kind to you and Milt? The brother who allowed you to live your parasitic life for so many years?"

I sat on the top step, arms on knees, head on arms, for a good twenty minutes before it occurred to me that there must be a back staircase to a house this large. With the caution of a rat in a Park Avenue kitchen, I slunk along those cream-colored walls until I came to the rear of the house and the back stairs.

I tiptoed down and entered a large kitchen teeming with expensive looking gadgets and saturated with the smell of baking ham. In a corner was a wine rack. I grabbed the first bottle that came to hand, eased through the back door, crept across a large screened porch and into the back yard.

The bottle tucked under my arm, I plunged into the heavy growth surrounding the shed and headed for the next street. I thought about having a peek in the shed but didn't want to push my luck.

It was almost five when I made it back to Blood Sweat and Black Iron. I locked the bike to the van with the Black Iron logo painted on it and went into the building.

Wading through the noise, the smells, and the glistening, straining muscles, I found CeeCee talking to a grossly muscled young man with a black ponytail and no neck. She was dressed in yellow Spandex and pointing to the muscles on her

right inner thigh. Arms folded, his face a blank mask of seriousness, the kid with no neck was staring at her thigh and nodding.

Then the kid, apparently enlightened, walked away. I went up to CeeCee and yelled, "Where's Cat?"

She pointed to a steel-framed apparatus festooned with cables and weights. Hanging from the top of a steel beam was the sling. Cat, her head and left front leg hanging out of it, was fast asleep.

CeeCee plucked the sling off the beam, handed it to me, and yelled, "I stretched her good and brushed her teeth again, just to get her used to it. Where the hell were you? I thought maybe I'd inherited a cat."

"I was catching up on some work," I hollered. "Thank you very much for taking care of Cat. May I drop by tomorrow?"

"You may. Want to stick around and do some iron? I won't charge you." I gave her my famous look of disdain and, with Cat snuggled in the sling, fled Blood Sweat and Black Iron.

Slumped on the settee, one hand gripping a mug of Lancers, the other gently kneading Cat's neck, I listened to the wind whisper in the trees and thought about unfulfilled dreams, self-concern, and murder. Later I refilled my mug, took the cover off my ancient Underwood, and started typing.

I leaned the bike against the wall, then stood by the woodstove and stared at the broad back of Betty Worthen. After a moment she raised her head and looked my way. She picked up her coffee and blue

cap, lumbered to the last booth, and slid into the back seat. I sat opposite. "Good morning, Betty."

She took off her cap and carefully placed it dead center on the table. "You're going to screw up my day, aren't you, Harry?"

I pulled the sheet of paper out of my sweatjacket pocket, unfolded it, and slid it across the table. Betty gave me a sour look, fished her glasses out of her blouse pocket, stuck them on the end of her nose, and picked up the paper.

She put the paper down, took off her glasses, and savaged her face with both hands. Then she sipped her coffee, gently set the cup down, and in a near whisper said, "Elinor is what? Sixty-five? Sixty-six? And Milt? He's at least that old. The last time I saw them they appeared to be in the very peak of bad health. They eat more than I do." She shook her big head. "What put you onto them?"

I pulled out the key ring. "Elinor gave Bob Kokar this key ring. It has the keys to that station wagon, which is natural since Bob was going to use it to deliver the chest to their house. It has the chest key, which Bob probably slipped on the ring per Elinor's instructions.

"The skeleton key must have been on the ring with the others when Elinor gave them to Bob. And the question I asked myself was, why have a key to your attic or basement on your car key ring?"

Betty grunted. "Because you are planning to kill your brother, stuff him in his new trunk, and hide his dead ass up in the attic, and you want to make sure everything is

handy. It would be frustrating if you wanted to lock the body in the attic and couldn't find the key."

"That's what I assume," I said. "Although locking the attic was somewhat unnecessary, since everybody would think Gordon was buried in Connecticut."

"Sure. But you've just killed your brother. He's *up there*, rotting. Locking the door was probably like sealing a tomb; it finalizes the act, gives it distance, and you don't have to think about it so much. Except the key was in Kokar's pocket . . . but I don't think it bothered those two all that much." She picked up the paper and carefully put her cap on. "Well, I'll go slip this under Chief Morin's nose and tell him we have to arrest that nice old couple, the Obermeyers, for murder. That should get his juices flowing."

I grabbed her wrist. "What are you going to say? Or, to put it another way, how are you going to keep me out of it?"

"I'm not sure, probably tell him I did a little private investigation. Somewhat like I did with Duncan Kokar. What you gotta hope is Elinor doesn't mention your visit. She's a bit dim, but your visit and her and Milt's arrest are going to be very close together. If she mentions you, I'll take a shot at covering it."

"The citizens of this fine community will judge you a wise and diligent policewoman."

"Perhaps, but the gods will judge me a lying hypocrite and no doubt punish me accordingly."

"A woman said much the same about me."

"Harry, when it comes your turn



to face the gods, I don't want to be anywhere around."

With Cat mewling nervously, I climbed the stairs to CeeCee Dorfman's apartment and banged on the door. She answered dressed in a baggy gray sweatsuit and wearing a tattered yellow headband with PAIN printed on it in bold black letters. I held out Cat and the bottle of sherry I'd stolen from the Obermeyers. "I'll try to make it back before you open."

She took Cat, who immediately calmed down, and looked at the bottle. "Well, well. This stuff costs around forty bucks. Does this mean you've come acourting?"

"It simply means I'm grateful for your kindness to Cat."

As I reached the bottom of the steps, CeeCee yelled, "Hey, Harry." I looked up at her. "This business of yours, does it have to do with that station wagon?"

"Yes, it does."

She stroked Cat. "You're a sneaky bastard, aren't you, Harry?"

I pedaled back to Gretchen's, left the bike against the back wall, and hurried to Winter Street. Turning the corner, I looked down the street and muttered a few strong words, for I was too late. Three police cars were parked in front of the Obermeyers, and Betty Worthen, Chief Morin, and two other policemen were mounting the front steps. I watched as they knocked, waited, knocked again, and were finally let into the house.

Walking like a tourist, I ambled back to Gretchen's and slumped in the last booth. Gretchen put a chilled mug and a carafe of red wine

in front of me, slid into the other seat, and lit a cigarette.

"You look kinda squinty-eyed and restless, like some animal that's been hunted for most of the night and is far from the den." Her eyes widened. "Cat? Where's Cat? She's all right, ain't she?"

I nodded. "Cat's fine. She's at CeeCee Dorfman's getting some physical therapy."

She grinned, and blue smoke drifted from between her yellowed teeth. "CeeCee Dorfman, huh. You giving that gal the benefit of your glittering personality?"

I put a shocked look on my face. "Hardly. She's too young and too tough. You know her?"

"She ain't all that young, and if ya look back far enough, you'd see we're kin. I lent her some money so she could buy the town garage and turn it into a gym. Paid me back within the year. How'd you happen to meet CeeCee? Your lifestyles ain't exactly in sync."

"She used to work at Kinch and Kokar, and I found out she's good with cats." I finished my wine and stood. "I have places to go and things to do. Will you keep an eye on the bike for me?"

"Of course I will. That's one of the perks ya get when ya drink at my restaurant. I watch over *all* the bicycles along the back wall."

As I walked past Winter Street, I looked toward the Obermeyer house. One police car was parked in front, and a lone policeman, fenced in by long ribbons of yellow crime scene tape, was pacing back and forth on the porch. I walked a block, turned up Summer Street, and

walked until I was opposite the Obermeyer house.

Trying to look like I did it every day, I ambled through the back parking lot of a small apartment house and traced the path across the vacant lot I'd taken yesterday. As I neared the Obermeyers', I scanned the rear windows, didn't notice any faces staring back, so plunged into the thick island of trees and brush surrounding the shed I'd seen from the attic window.

The shed was a garage, and after seventeen years of neglect, about the only reason it was still standing was its sturdy build and a network of thick vines that gripped it in a tight web.

I forced my way along its side to a set of sliding double doors. The top guide wheels had long since rusted to the tracks, but the bottom guides were gone so I pulled one door out and slipped into a moist blackness that smelled like a zoo and reminded me of the walk-in at the senior center.

Pulling out my handy penlight, I flicked it on and cut a narrow swath through the black space. The left side of the garage held an ancient lump of rust that might have once been a riding lawnmower, a wheelbarrow with a plastic tub that still glowed a faint red and was filled with some sort of muck, and several lumps that probably had once been bags of fertilizer.

The right side held a rusted, grime-encrusted 1976 Plymouth station wagon. The tires had rotted away, and the car had sunk into the dirt floor to the bottom of its doors. I crept to the driver's door,

gripped the handle with both hands, put my right foot against the metal, and with the hinges shrieking in protest, forced the door open.

Time and critters had turned the inside of the station wagon into a primitive landscape. As I gingerly crawled into the remains of the front seats, small furry things scurried in every direction.

Finding nothing in the front, I climbed over the seat into the back. The rear seats were folded flat and piled with rank, decayed clothing infested with tiny, squeaking creatures. I had to put my head into that fetid mess, but I found it under a pile of cloth on the floor behind the front passenger seat.

With effort and some noise I managed to get the door closed and slipped out of that dark world. I plowed through the trees and brush, took several deep breaths, and made my way back to Gretchen's, washed up, and reclaimed my bike.

CeeCee Dorfman opened the door, held out Cat, and smirked. "She didn't scream nearly as much as she did the first couple of times. Not that it bothers me. I just duct-tape her mouth shut and keep going."

I narrowed my eyes and said in a low voice, "Your treatment of Cat has not gone unnoticed. A herd of animal lovers are going to descend on this den of pain any minute now."

"No problem. I'll sign them up for a term of Black Iron. When I'm through with them, *they'll* be animals. Listen, I've got to open up. See you tomorrow?"

I nodded, said, "Thanks," and headed down the stairs.

"How's the thing with the station wagon coming?" CeeCee asked.

"It's almost over."

"Listen, you're going to tell me about it, aren't you?"

I stopped at Gretchen's for a mug of motivation to get me home and saw Betty Worthen sitting alone in the last booth drinking coffee. I bought a carafe of wine and slid into the seat beside her. Cat pulled herself out of the sling, sniffed at Betty's empty cup, sat down by the napkin holder and stared across the room at Gretchen, Bringer of Beef.

Betty picked up the carafe and filled her cup and my mug. Then she held out her cup. I tapped it with the mug, and we drank.

"Rabart was going to sell the house," she said. "He gave them three months to find another place to live. Apparently his new position in Connecticut was the perfect excuse to sever the cord.

"After all those years of good living at Rabart's expense, spending their golden years in a trailer wasn't in the cards. So at five o'clock the morning after the party they helped him load his trunk into the back of the station wagon. When he turned to Milt to give him a last handshake, Elinor pulled Milt's Knights of Columbus ceremonial sword from under the car and rammed it through his chest.

"Now, if you think about it, even if that thing had severed his aorta, it still would have been a terrible minute or so until he died. Chief Morin asked them if they said anything to him while he lay there with three feet of steel through

him, and they looked at Morin like he was some kind of lizard."

Betty drank some of her wine. "They unloaded the chest, folded Rabart into it, and hauled it up to the attic. They called Connecticut and told the university that he was killed in a car accident up here. They waited a week, then spread the word and drove down to Connecticut in a rented car for the 'funeral.' While there, they found a printer who made up a newspaper facsimile describing Gordon's accident and sent it up here to the *Gazette*, which printed the thing. They told everyone that Gordon had always wanted to be buried in Connecticut because that's where his parents were buried, which happens to be true."

She poured more wine in her cup and gave me a sideways look. "They have a good lawyer, and tomorrow everybody meets with the D.A. for a plea-bargain session. Gloria Barbara, our new assistant D.A., thinks they'll get five or six years in the locked ward at the county home."

"Five or six years in a county home?"

"This is rural America, Harry. The courts are backlogged into the next century, and the prisons are jammed. And no one in the D.A.'s office wants to be the one to take those two nice, fat, sick old people before a jury of their peers."

We drank in silence for several minutes. Then Betty tapped me on the hand. "We're going to haul the station wagon out of the garage later this afternoon." She smiled thinly. "About an hour ago Donny Pavia, our new gung-ho apprentice patrol-

man, radioed in that he thought he'd heard someone prowling around back there and wanted to know if he should check it out. I told him to stay on the porch. Didn't want him to waste some curiosity seeker hiding in the trees."

I nodded slowly. "That was probably a good idea."

Annie was in her kitchen, but I decided against any theatrics. I backed away from the window and rapped on the door. When she answered, I said, "Perhaps a glass of wine?"

She nodded, stepped back into the kitchen, and ran her hand through hair that looked like it might have been combed last Christmas.

She pushed a pile of magazines off an ancient wood chair painted three different colors and seated me at the kitchen table, which was a cluttered mishmash of cast-iron pans, three working toasters, about six weeks' worth of newspapers, and a wire cage with a sleek looking gerbil in it.

Cat pulled herself out of the sling onto the table and despite her hand-icaps threaded her way through the junk without bumping into anything, sat down in front of the gerbil's cage, and clamped her good paw on the wire door.

Annie put a water glass full of white wine in front of me. She raised her own glass, and we toasted and drank.

I pulled the package wrapped in brittle gold foil from under my sweatjacket and handed it to her.

She stared at it for a long time, took a sudden deep breath, and looked at me.

I smiled, gently I hoped, and said nothing. She carefully slipped the stiff, mold-blackened ribbon off the package and tried to unwrap the thick gold foil paper. It was too brittle and fell apart in her hands, so she just pushed it off, revealing a cedarwood box. She studied the box, then pried up the clasp. Reaching in, she plucked several small pieces of yellowed pasteboard out of the box and fanned them out like a hand of cards.

She looked at them a few moments and then whispered, "Two tickets to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts for a special showing of modern Impressionists, two tickets to *The King and I*, and two tickets to the new Boston Aquarium."

She raised her glass and gulped down the wine. Then she pushed herself up with both hands, grabbed the bottle off the counter, and re-filled her glass.

We sat in the dim, cluttered kitchen. Annie, the tears flowing down her face, gazed at the tickets in her trembling hand. And I looked out the window at the coming night and listened to the distant rumble of thunder.

Finally Annie came around the table, patted my shoulder twice, and shuffled out of the kitchen.

Cat limped over to the edge of the table, fell into my arms, laid her small head against my chest, and meowed softly as thunder rolled over The Farm.

# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the January issue.*

Seena Lott, director of the Intriguing Italy tour, had never encountered such a problem. At the last minute six singles joined the tour, each wanting a separate room in the crowded hotel. Their last names were Gilson, Hanks, Inman, Jenkins, Kilmer, and Lange. They included three elderly ladies (Alice, Betty, and Cynthia) and three old bachelors (Dan, Earl, and Frank). Each hailed from a different state.

She at last arranged rooms for them, one on each of the small hotel's six floors. Each of the cantankerous six then requested her personal assistance the next day in shopping for particular souvenirs: stamps, books, ceramic figurines, maps, slides, and linens.

(1) Lange was on the first floor just below Earl and just above the person wanting stamps. They came from Kentucky, Ohio, and Pennsylvania (in some order).

(2) Frank was on the floor just below Gilson and just above the person from Rhode Island.

(3) Cynthia was on the floor just below the person wanting linens and just above the person from New Jersey. Their last names were Inman, Jenkins, and Kilmer (in some order).

(4) The person from Minnesota was on the floor just below Dan and just above the person wanting books (whose last name wasn't Kilmer).

(5) The man wanting slides (who wasn't from Pennsylvania) was on the floor just above the person from Ohio.

(6) Inman was on the floor just above the person wanting maps (whose last name wasn't Jenkins).

(7) Alice was on the floor just below Hanks.

Around two in the morning Ms. Lott fell into a fitful sleep. She was awakened an hour later by local carabinieri. One person on her tour had killed another! The man wanting slides had been fatally stabbed by the sweetheart he had jilted fifty years before; she had been quartered on the floor adjacent to him.

*Who murdered whom on this ill-fated tour?*

See page 138 for the solution to the November puzzle.

FICTION



# BY FORCE AND AGAINST THE KING'S PEACE

James S. Dorr



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Rowen thought the justice of the peace looked *very* old. Or perhaps not so much old but stern, almost frightening, dressed as he was in his stiff black robe and his slightly yellowed, curled lambswool wig. She almost giggled—a giggle of nervousness. He reminded her of Master Aubric.

She blinked. Had that been a flash of light she had seen, out of the corner of one of her eyes, as she looked first to her left, toward the dour sheriff with his sword and mail shirt who had delivered the summons to bring her here, then to her right toward a sad-faced yet neatly dressed peasant farmer who stood, his own eyes staring down at the floor? Or was she just sensitive, overly sensitive to, perhaps, a play of sunlight through the diamond-paned chamber window? The flare of a candle?

But hadn't the flash appeared tinged with a faint blue?

She blinked again. Or was she *just* nervous, although as a wizard now in her own right she had no need to be so. She thought of Aubric, the College of Wizards where he was a tutor and where until only three months ago she had been his apprentice. And then to her time outside, just on the outskirts of this very town where, alive with hope for a brilliant career, she had set out her shingle: MISTRESS ROWEN. CONSULTATIONS. FORTUNES BOTH ILL & GOOD, w/ WARDS AGAINST SAME. PHILTRES & MAGICKS. And how she had waited, yet no one came to her.

Until this morning when Sheriff Laidley had knocked on her door.

"A consultation, m'lady," he had said, gruffly and sounding, himself, a bit nervous. He showed her the parchment—her summons to be here, drawn up in Latin as if *that* would be enough to compel her should she be reluctant. But why be reluctant?

And now she stood thinking she was very young, very inexperienced out in the real world. Laidley cleared his throat.

"All rise," the sheriff said. Rowen glanced about her again and saw that, save for the justice himself, everyone there was already standing. She, the sheriff, the peasant farmer, there were no others. "This Circuit Court," the sheriff continued, "King's Justice Giles Sunderson presiding, is now in session. All with business here may now step forward."

Rowen nearly giggled again in the silence that followed—but was that another faint flash of blue? She shook her head. It could not be so. Light flashes of that sort accompanied magic, yet she was the only wizard present. Unless . . .

Her train of thought was broken as the sheriff cleared his throat once again, this time glancing past her, not at the justice but toward the farmer. "I said, *all* with business . . ."

The farmer trembled. He took one step forward. "Y-yer lordship," he began.

"Yes," the justice said, looking up from the papers spread on the bench before him. Rowen noticed his voice seemed kindly. "Your name is Delbert?"

"Y-yes," the farmer said, twisting his hat in his hands as he stammered. "I-I seek recompense."

"I see," the justice said, looking again at one of the papers. "It says here this is a case of trespass. *Vi et armis et contra pacem Regis*—by force and arms and against the king's peace. The destruction"—he looked up once more, and this time his voice took a tone of puzzlement—"of a field of barley?"

"A hailstorm destroyed this farmer's crop, your lordship," the sheriff said. "And he seeks restitution for it." Now Rowen was puzzled, too. An act of nature? Unless, she thought . . .

"Of a field of barley," the justice repeated. "Well, hailstorms will do that. It is a misfortune." His voice took a harsh edge. "But scarcely a breach of peace." Then his voice softened again as he looked, for the first time, at Rowen. "And who is this person?"

"T-the summons I asked you to sign last evening, your lordship," the sheriff said. "What did you call it?"

"The *amicus curiae*?"

"Y-yes, sir," the sheriff said. "This is the expert. She's new to these parts, but I've kept an eye on her. She hasn't caused any trouble as yet. . . ."

"I still don't understand," the justice said. "This is a court of law. Nothing more nor less. Even the king himself would scarcely claim its jurisdiction extends to the weather. And yet you have brought these people before me . . ."

And now Rowen understood—part of it anyway—even before the farmer spoke this time. "E-excusing myself to yer lordship," the farmer said, twisting his hat in his hands all the harder, "but it weren't natural, this hailstorm weren't. It's my belief it were done by a wizard."

Thank all goodness, Rowen thought, that the justice had finally called a recess. She remembered his questioning why, if Farmer Delbert accused a wizard, he had brought his complaint to King's Court in the first place.

"Are there not Wizards' Courts for such disputes?" he'd asked the farmer.

"Aye, lordship," the farmer replied. "But who can trust wizards? I mean for justice, they stick with their own kind." And here he had glanced with suspicion toward Rowen. "That is, when one harms a person like me, what chance would I have in a case conducted under the rules they make for themselves?"

Rowen had tried to protest at that point. "Wizards are sworn to be fair in all matters," she interrupted. "Whether with people or with other wizards. Indeed, in a Wizards' Court, just as in this one, the court is in effect the employee of the complainant." She glanced when she said this at Justice Sunderson. "Is that not true, sir?"

"Yes," he had answered. "And you're out of order."

She'd felt herself blush. "I-I, yes, I'm sorry. I just wanted to say that we wizards in fact must take an oath before we're deemed fit to go forth in the world, that 'loyalty to he who hires thee must in all things come first, save only that no injustice be caused thereby.' Surely your lordship knows this as well."

"Yes," he had answered. "And, Mistress Rowen, you're still out of order. The problem is this: that even those who take solemn oaths may sometimes break them. Even wizards. Is that not what Farmer Delbert is saying?"

"Aye, yer lordship," the farmer answered. "Just this, that I wish to stick with *my* own kind. To trust the king's justice, not in some 'fairness' of warlocks and witches who do who-knows-what in their lairs in the forest. Who flatten farmers' fields with their hailstones. Who seek . . ."

Here Farmer Delbert fell suddenly silent. The justice nodded. "I understand how you feel," he said, "but I must take this question of jurisdiction under advisement." He glanced to where Rowen stood, silent herself now. "And I will need to speak briefly to you alone."

Rowen had nodded, and left the chamber some time later with much to think about. She walked through the narrow streets of the town, past her own lodging and out to the countryside, stopping once at a field that stood out from all the others, the grain it had once grown now flattened and ruined. Looking around to be sure she was not watched, she flew like the wind out over the forest beyond the fields, through light and darkness, through shadow and twilight, until she had reached the mist-shrouded mountain on whose top stood the College of Wizards.

She hailed Master Aubric as soon as she landed.

"What brings you here, child?" he said as he led her into his workroom. "Do things go well at the place you've chosen to set your practice?"

"I think you know, Master Aubric," she answered. She glared at the mirror that stood against one wall but showed no reflection. At least at that moment. "A strange thing happened to me this morning. I've been hired to be a consultant in a case before the king's justice of the peace—a case in which the accused is a wizard. But when I stood before the bench, I saw a flash of light . . ."

"Yes," the older wizard said, "I know of this matter, and I *was* watching. And as you may have guessed, it was I who suggested the sheriff might come to you for help. So tell me this: do you believe the culprit is one of us?"

"I think so," she said. "I've been to the farmer's field, and it still retains the smell of magic about its edges. But how do I prove this? I mean, in a Wizards' Court that would be enough, just my word on it, but how in this court?"

"Ah," Master Aubric said, "that is the question. A reconstruction, perhaps, of the storm itself?"

"Perhaps," Rowen answered. "Though of course there's then the question of why it was done. Whether by accident or with some purpose. Perhaps that will come out—the farmer started to say something more just before the court recessed, but then he stopped as if he'd had second thoughts on the matter. But there was something else. A second light flash."

"Ah," Master Aubric said. "Someone else watching? Another wizard, subtle enough that I didn't see it, but you, standing there in the chamber itself . . ."

"And magic always produces energy," Rowen completed the wizard's thought for him. "Energy that, however small, always manifests itself in light. And so the culprit perhaps spies on me as well as you do. But there was something else, and something else, too. The first was the plaintiff—he doesn't trust us. The justice asked him why he had not gone to a Wizards' Court with this, and he said he feared we would stick with our own. That we'd treat him unfairly. In spite of the oath we take, even if I were a part of the court, he even implied that I myself might lie to protect a fellow wizard."

Master Aubric nodded. "Mistress Rowen," he said—he addressed her by her title this time—"I had hoped on my own part that you would fail in this case. Or better yet, be able to prove conclusively that there was no magic. The smell of a field, after all, is a small thing. It can be misleading. But that second light flash . . ."

He paused a moment, then spoke more slowly. "Our Eastern brethren have a saying: That once a djinni is out of its bottle, it cannot be put back. There is danger here," he said. "Times are changing in the world outside. Once there were bridges between us and ordinary people. We went our own ways, true, but we still had commerce. When somebody asked, we accepted their hire, we became as their servants as our oath implies. But times are changing."

"And people don't trust us in general," Rowen said. "Is that what you're saying? It's not just one farmer."

Master Aubric nodded again, then changed the subject. "There was one more 'something else' you mentioned."

"Yes," Rowen answered. "Something that came to me. Suppose I did prove a wizard was guilty? Under a Wizards' Court he would be sanctioned, but that's not the king's law. That's not what Farmer Delbert is seeking. What Delbert demands is recompense for a wrong 'by force and against the peace'—a wrong perpetrated against his land. But what if this wizard refused to give it?"

"Ah," Master Aubric finally said, "that is a question."

"All rise in the matter of *Farmer Delbert v. Wizard or Wizards As Yet Unnamed*," the sheriff called out the following morning, and Rowen, who had her own table and chair now, stood up with the others. Justice

Sunderson entered the court, again looking old and stiff and formal, belying, she thought, the more relaxed air he had shown the day before when he'd seen her in his private chambers. And yet what he'd said then, in words paralleling those Master Aubric had used to her later, stuck in her mind. Stuck and disturbed her. And then, when he'd had her repeat her Wizards' Oath, but here in King's Court, her hand on the Royal Seal, as if he too did not fully trust her . . .

She almost missed the sheriff's next words, ordering the court to be seated. She had, against protocol, looked behind her to see that the room was half filled with townspeople, unlike the day before, most undoubtedly merely curious but—adding to her sense of disturbance—a few who already showed scowls of anger. She watched as they sat, then suddenly realized—turning, she sat, too.

"If it please the court," the sheriff continued, "we have here an expert in matters of gramarye." Rowen winced. She disliked the old term with its smack of evil, realizing now the effect it might have on those who sat behind her. She thought of her practice—her own lack of business—then tried to smile bravely.

Justice Sunderson glared down from his bench. "Mistress Rowen," the sheriff called.

Again she smiled bravely. "Present, your lordship," she answered, rising. "As we discussed, the task before your court is to determine if wizardry was in fact used in this matter." She gestured toward the equipment she had had arranged on her table, then held up a broken stalk of barley. "This is from Farmer Delbert's field," she said, realizing that she had to be careful—whatever her actions, they should not seem threatening. "What I am going to do is place it in this crucible, then add some powder. I'll do some more things. There may be some loud noises—maybe a flash of light, somewhat like lightning, but it will be harmless. But if things work right, on that space over there—" she pointed to the blank wall to the bench's left, across the chamber from its sole window—"we should gain a picture of what happened to it."

She paused and looked up at Justice Sunderson. "Proceed," he began, when suddenly there was a sharp blue flash. A premature burst of light.

She made herself blush, as if it were her doing, as if some accident. "Er . . . sorry," she said, thinking quickly. She heard a murmuring start up behind her. "Sometimes these things happen, but again, please let me assure you that all I'll be doing is showing pictures. It will all be harmless."

She worked quickly now. She knew from the color, a subtle gradation of hue and shade, that this was the same as the second flash of the previous day. She cast her powders, a red, then a white one, then whispered some words, then another red one. She lit a candle beneath the crucible, then muttered more words.

She clapped her hands, partly for effect, partly to distract from what

sounded like a crash of thunder; in a blinding yellow flash the wall seemed to disappear. Instead, the left side of the room itself seemed to blend into a field of waving grain.

From a clear sky a cloud appeared, black and threatening. It coalesced over the field of barley and only that one field, taking on a rectangular form that matched the plot's borders. Another crash, but this time of real thunder, rang through the court chamber as images of real lightning flashed, accompanied by the hissing of hailstones.

And then, just as quickly, the cloud disappeared, leaving the ruin of the field behind it—and still just that one field, the ones surrounding it intact, their crops untouched by the storm.

"Aye," a voice called out, not from the image that, its purpose ended, was already starting to slowly fade but from the table where Farmer Delbert sat. "Aye," the farmer continued, "that was it! That was what happened exactly, and just to my field. Not to the others." 'Twas *magic* that did it." He glanced momentarily toward a woman who sat with the audience, a peasant woman dressed much as he but young and quite comely. "And if it were not enough . . ."

Once again Delbert's voice trailed into silence as if he thought he'd said enough already. The justice glared at him, and then at Rowen. "Your opinion, mistress?" he asked.

"If it please your lordship, my opinion is that it *was* magic. The smell is powerful—you may not be sensitive to it as I am, but even at that, the shape of the cloud and the fact that it affected only Delbert's field were unnatural."

The justice nodded. "It is the opinion of this court, too, that the damage complained of was not through nature but rather through act or acts of wizardry. Furthermore, the court declares the complainant has indeed been wronged through trespass—" the justice now quoted from a parchment spread out before him "'—an unlawful act upon the person, property, or rights of another, committed by force, actual or implied.'" He looked up again. "As such, the court now declares this matter to be within its jurisdiction—a breach of the king's peace."

He glanced toward the sheriff. "All rise," the sheriff said. "This court is recessed until tomorrow."

Rowen, still standing, had waited until the sounds of the townspeople leaving the chamber behind her had ended. She'd started to gather her things when Justice Sunderson reappeared, looking even older now than before. Or perhaps not so much old but tired. Tired and worried.

"My thanks to you, Mistress Rowen," he said, "though I have to confess—" and now his voice sounded like Master Aubric's the evening before, when he had said words of a similar nature "—that I had hoped you would fail. That you would not have been able to prove that magic



was involved. That way, you see, I could have declared it an act of nature and simply dismissed the complaint altogether. That would have been simpler."

Rowen nodded. "But now the djinni is out of the bottle?"

The justice smiled. "What an original way to put it! But yes, that is what I meant, Mistress Rowen. But what kind of bottle?"

"Generally brass," she started to answer, until she realized he hadn't finished.

"We justices take oaths, you know," he continued. "The same as you wizards, and of much the same sort. That no injustice may come of our actions. I think, perhaps, that we are both trapped in this matter together, and that neither of us could act in any way other than we do."

Rowen waited a moment. "I am free to go, though?"

The justice smiled again, then shook his head. "I am sorry, but no," he answered. "We are both bound by oath, as I say, however separate our traditions may be. Courts of justice are set in their own ways—the standings, the sittings, the old fashioned language—yet still it comes to the same thing, does it not?"

Rowen winced. "Which is?" she asked.

The justice gestured across the room toward where the sheriff had just reentered and now stood glowering with distrust at Rowen. "There are others who follow this case," he said. "Not just this town, but from the king's palace. Powerful people. And so, 'which is' this: that now you must help us find out who is guilty."

Rowen had walked to the edge of the town and beyond and, when she was sure no one else would see her, transported herself once again to the College.

Master Aubric was waiting for her. "I did not spy on you this time," he said. "You asked me not to. But now you must tell me all."

"Another did spy, though. I saw the flash—the same flash as yesterday's, but bright enough that others saw it, too, as if he didn't care. As if he taunted me."

"I see," Aubric said. "And have you any idea who it might be?"

Rowen shook her head. "And that's the problem. I might have an idea if I remembered the exact hue of the light well enough; I might recognize it outside of the courtroom. There would be records here, too, at the College that I could go through, some of which would contain information on personal traits of previous students. But even then color's a subtle thing, like the smell of magic. Even if I could find a match, and it might take ages even to try, even using both my and your powers to aid in the search, it wouldn't convince the court. And that's the job Justice Sunderson gave me, to find the culprit. That's even assuming the one who's been spying on me is the culprit."

"Wait a moment," Master Aubric said. "What do you mean, the job the

justice gave you? I thought the summons the sheriff delivered was simply to prove the presence of magic, which I assume you've done. If I were you, I'd leave the rest of this matter alone now."

Rowen shook her head. "But the Wizards' Oath, Master Aubric. I took it again—I told you last night—in the justice's presence. I'm bound to be loyal to he who hires me, which in this case is the justice's court. In fact, he even reminded me in a way, after the court recessed this afternoon, by pointing out that he has his own oath as a justice of the king's peace. And he implied further that even though these oaths might spring from different traditions . . ."

Aubric nodded. "It seems that you're stuck, then. There are, to be sure, rogue wizards—wizards who break their oath. The one you seek is likely one of these. And that can make your job doubly dangerous, because the common people may not understand the distinction. But for the same reason, it makes it imperative that you do keep it."

Rowen felt very small and very alone and very frightened. "I may need your help in this, Master Aubric. Before it is over. Perhaps of your fellows too—of the whole College."

"Of course," Master Aubric said. "In that we can help. Remember that this is not a Wizards' Court, though, Mistress Rowen. And so, if you wish to find your culprit, and in such a way that this Justice Sunderson will accept it, you'll have to make use of *his* court's traditions."

The following morning Rowen was called to stand next to the justice at the king's bench, facing the townspeople who this time nearly packed the chamber. More, too, wore scowls.

"I call my first witness," Rowen began. She'd spoken with Justice Sunderson briefly before the session to make sure she had the forms of address right. "The farmer, Delbert."

She watched as Delbert got up from his table, looking once behind him toward the same woman he'd glanced at the day before, then let the sheriff lead him to the bench. She looked in his eyes first—she thought a small spell might help bring the truth from him if such should be needed, but then she thought better. No, it must be their rules.

"You are Farmer Delbert, who have brought a complaint before this court?"

"Aye," Delbert answered.

"And you are prepared now to answer my questions, in truth and in fullness?"

The farmer hesitated, just for a moment. "Aye," he finally said.

"And you do realize that, if you should fail to, you yourself may be brought accused before the king's justice?"

The farmer nodded, his face turning red now. "Aye," he grumbled.

"Good," Rowen said. She pointed past him toward the audience. "Who is that woman?"

Delbert looked startled. "M-my wife," he answered. "But why bring her into this? That is, I . . ."

Rowen smiled at him, hoping it might help put him at his ease. "Twice before, Farmer Delbert," she said, "yesterday and the day prior to that, it seemed as if you were about to say something, but then you halted. And twice as well you have glanced toward your wife, the first time just before one of these pauses. What I wish to know—and mind you that I accuse you of nothing—is if either you or your wife might have had other dealings with wizards."

Delbert looked up at the justice. "M-must I answer these things, yer lordship?"

The justice nodded.

Delbert spoke slowly. "I-I don't know even if it's the same wizard what flattened my crops," he said. "But you see, my wife and I had a baby a couple of months back. A charming little girl, our first child. And it was just after the christening this happened, the hail and the barley, and then just after that. Well, as I say, it might not be the same, but this man comes up and says he's a wizard . . ."

Suddenly Rowen caught a glimpse of a pale blue flash—as quick as thought—between her and the farmer. Delbert saw it, too.

"Someone is watching," she whispered to him. "Perhaps the same one who damaged your field. But he can't hurt you here." Then, in a louder voice, she continued. "Go on, Farmer Delbert."

"Well, I just meant to say, he claimed he had heard about my wife and me, and the christening." Delbert spoke rapidly now, his voice nervous. "He said he had also heard I might need money, what with my field and all. So he—I wouldn't agree, of course—but he took out a big purse and said he'd be willing to *buy* my daughter."

Rowen turned red, redder than the farmer. She had heard of such things but always in terms of ancient stories, never as something that happened in these times. And always of Faerie, not of wizards.

Unless there were something more.

"I see," she finally said. "And so you did not agree to this offer?"

"It would be *illegal*," the farmer said. "Even if . . ."

"Even if you would be willing. I understand. But do you have any idea, Farmer Delbert, why this wizard would want your daughter?"

The farmer shook his head in such a way that Rowen believed him. But behind him she saw the woman he'd called his wife turn suddenly pale. She turned toward the bench.

"I think that will do for Farmer Delbert for now," she said. "But I wish to call up the farmer's wife."

The justice nodded, and moments later the trembling woman stood before Rowen. "Your name?" Rowen asked.

"A-Alysoun, mistress," the woman answered. "But I ain't done nothing."

"Of course not," Rowen said in a gentle voice. "Where is your daughter now, incidentally?"

"S-she's with an aunt." The woman suddenly stopped and turned even paler than before. "S-she—you don't think she's in any danger?"

Rowen shook her head. "I don't think so. If this wizard intended to steal her, he wouldn't have made your husband the offer. Nevertheless, I think it would be best if you don't tell us exactly which aunt." The woman nodded, and Rowen went on. "In any event, if you answer my questions, perhaps we can bring this wizard to justice before he does anyone any more harm."

The woman nodded again. "Yes, mistress."

"Good," Rowen said. "Now, I take it your husband didn't tell you about this offer to buy your daughter. Why should he worry you with something like that? Nevertheless, when he mentioned it now, you had a reaction, but not so much at the mention itself. Rather, Alysoun, what you reacted to was my question as to whether there might be a reason."

"Y-yes, mistress," Alysoun said. She started to cry then, and Rowen glanced quickly at Delbert, satisfying herself by the look on his face that he loved his wife deeply. She patted Alysoun's hand.

"It will be all right," she said. "I'm sure it will be. But you must tell us, *Do you* have some idea of what this wizard might want with your daughter?"

"I—" Alysoun wiped her eyes on her sleeve, a sleeve well cut and of good cloth but like most peasants' clothing, very much out of the latest fashion.

Rowen smiled again. "Go on," she prompted.

"I—I don't know if it would be even the same man, but when Delbert and I were courting—and Delbert knows this—I had another suitor. What he does not know, however, was this suitor was a wizard."

"I see," Rowen said. "Now, wizards are powerful and generally wealthy—" she winced as she said this, suddenly thinking of her own business, or rather lack of it. As Aubric had told her, times were, indeed, changing. "And yet you chose Delbert?"

"Aye, mistress," the woman said, nodding vigorously. "He is a good man and wealthy as well, at least for a farmer. At least until this—this loss of this year's crop. He's given to me a fine baby daughter. And not only that . . ."

These peasants are maddening, Rowen thought. Always stopping just when they've come to the interesting part. "Go on," she prompted.

Alysoun blushed. "Well, beggin' yer pardon, mistress," she said, "I was brought up proper. I mean, this wizard was handsome enough, with fine auburn hair, even if on the plump side, and not much older seeming than Delbert, though I suppose wizards can make themselves look any age that might please them. Is this not true, mistress?"

"In theory, yes. And their lovers as well. But the magic is troublesome

to maintain, so most don't do so. But what did you mean, you were brought up properly?"

Alysoun blushed more deeply this time. "Well, you know, mistress. Wizards and people? I-I mean wizards are people, too, of course, but, well, it's not the same, is it, mistress? I mean, we want to stick with our own kinds, people and people? Wizards and wizards? M-me and Delbert?" She looked away from Rowen then to glance at her husband, still at his table. "A-and anyway, mistress, I love *him*."

"Yes," Rowen said. "Thank you, Alysoun. I know you love Delbert and that he loves you. So I have just one more question to ask. Granting that he may have given a false one, what was this suitor's name?"

Alysoun blushed once more. "Humfrey," she answered.

Wonderful, Rowen thought as she left the court that afternoon, dodging a group of workmen who'd just entered the town square dragging tools and materials with them. After Alysoun had been reseated, Delbert had confirmed his wife's description, but wizards often had auburn hair and ran to plumpness—the older ones, anyway, who still were wealthy. Who could afford rich diets. Moreover, Humfrey was a quite common name, one that came in and out of fashion.

"Nevertheless, it is still a lead," she told Master Aubric when she once more stood before him at the College. "And, yes, he was spying again in the courtroom. He tried to be subtle this time, but the blue of the light flash reflected off the chamber window, almost destroying the spell for a moment. Even Delbert saw something was wrong. And this time I memorized the exact color."

"It still won't be accepted," Aubric said. "That is, the color shade. Not for the proof you need. But as you say, there's now more to go on."

Moments later Rowen and her mentor had gained permission from the headmaster of the College to search its records. They toiled for hours in the cobweb-filled basement room, hours that seemed to stretch into days even with time dilation, until Aubric suddenly snapped his fingers.

"Here's one that matches, Rowen," he said. "The name. The description. He was even plump as a student. And he's still active, though somewhat reclusive. Mage Humfrey le Fier. But the real thing is, if you think that love may have been a motive, back in the days when he was still learning, the rumor was that he had a crush on a fellow apprentice."

"Let me see." Rowen took the tome from Aubric's hands and blew the rest of the dust off its pages. "He and another, now Mistress Bronwyn, apprentices to a Mistress Althena." She looked up at Aubric. "*The Mistress Althena?*"

Aubric nodded. "A very powerful wizard in her day—that was some centuries back, even before my time, but we still heard about her in the College. I understand she later journeyed to the mountains of the Far

East to further her research and, later yet, sent for Bronwyn to join her. That is, after . . .”

Wizards and peasants, Rowen amended her earlier thought of that afternoon. Both seemed to stop at the interesting parts. “After?” she prompted.

“A moment, mistress,” Aubric said. “It was a long time ago, as I say even before my own time. But there were rumors. Some kind of a scandal.”

Rowen had heard of Humfrey le Fier, she now recalled. Humfrey the Proud. One who kept to himself, even skipping most of the annual Conclaves unless some matter were up for discussion that might affect him directly. And one who was rumored to be quite strong—as he must be, she thought, if he’d had a mentor like Mistress Althena.

“Ah, here now,” Aubric finally said. He had a new volume open before him, that of Bronwyn. “This was something rare even then, but she was somewhat wild. Often incurring her mistress’s displeasure. Apparently Mistress Althena encouraged Humfrey’s suit, thinking such union might calm Bronwyn down, but Bronwyn—it says here she loved a soldier.”

Rowen blushed. She knew about soldiers. Dashing. Romantic. Not that she herself would ever have *loved* one. But then she thought about Justice Giles Sunderson, how he looked, especially when he was able to smile in his private chambers, like he himself might once have been a soldier. And how—well, wizards could cast spells of youthfulness and of prolonged life, though, as she’d told Farmer Delbert’s wife, it was not that simple.

She shook her head, laughing. Another thought had come, about Farmer Delbert’s wife and what was “proper.” Bronwyn and soldiers. Still, one might have done worse.

She looked over Aubric’s shoulder at the open page. It contained Bronwyn’s picture, a faded miniature, showing a woman who, even in clothing far out of fashion, seemed young and quite comely.

And suddenly the details came together.

“There is a resemblance,” Rowen said as she stood before the bench the next morning, the farmer’s wife Alysoun standing at her side and in her hands a portrait of Bronwyn. “Especially the clothing.”

She smiled when she said that. Her own clothing, too, was of a retro fashion—a fad of the moment when she’d first come to be an apprentice—but she’d saved it in her chest, and on an impulse she’d worn it this morning, noting when she later entered the chamber that Justice Sunderson seemed to approve of it. Courts and tradition, she thought—that of King’s Courts as well as Wizards’ Courts. But now tradition was being broken.

She turned to address the rest of the chamber, packed wall to wall not just with townspeople, but with faculty from the College. “There is a re-



semblance," she repeated, raising her voice when a sudden crash sounded from the square outside, from the workmen she'd seen the previous afternoon. *What* were they doing? She glanced at the justice, whose face told her nothing, then back to the crowd again, searching for Aubric. For any face that wasn't clouded with anger.

"There is," she said a third time, "a resemblance." She had to show confidence—that was her weapon. "The clothing, old fashioned. The face. A look, perhaps, in her eye—" and once again she was interrupted, this time by the all-too-familiar blue flash. "Her hair, long and lustrous." She whirled to show the court her own hair, long and lustrous as well. "An innocence, maybe, that comes with a woman's youth. Items enough to fool an old lecher."

She felt a shudder vibrate through the chamber, not from the crowd nor the workers outside but from something outside that. Good, she thought.

"And there is as well a sordid story. A story of a foolish apprentice who thought he might love a fellow wizard, except he was fat and she threw him over, desiring instead the love of a young and handsome soldier. A normal person and not a wizard, and thus an insult. Especially when the soldier refused her and our apprentice approached her again, thinking he'd have her now."

Once again the chamber shuddered—a shudder that carried the feelings of great wrath. Good, she thought as she glanced at the crowd, sensing the anger there as well, but anger now mixed with fear. And, growing stronger in some of the townspeople, curiosity.

"But would she have him?" She shook her head. "No. I can imagine their conversation, she telling him he was still fat and toadlike. That despite their mistress's approval should she change her mind, she would never have him. And then later, when they went their own ways, their studies completed, she came to fame, so much so in fact that later their mistress called her to come with her to study in the East while *he*, the toad, built himself a castle and hid himself in it, ashamed to be seen by her or by any other wizard."

The air, she noted, the very air in the chamber was starting to turn a pale blue. Not only those present in person were listening, hanging on every word. Good, she thought again, hoping the fear she felt—fear and the knowledge that with every word she was sailing out farther beyond her depth—didn't look too obvious. Or at least that anger and insult might mask a certain listener's perception.

"And so, what then happened?" she asked rhetorically, glancing back once to Justice Sunderson, then to the crowd again, searching until her gaze found the headmaster sitting next to her own Master Aubric. "You, sir, you all know, you of the College. Or else you have now guessed. This toad's reputation is in the records."

She turned to Delbert, who sat at his table, his wife now beside him,

their arms clutched together. In the brief silence she motioned to Delbert.

Trembling, the farmer came forward.

"Now, Delbert," she said, "is it true that a wizard once courted the woman that you were betrothed to?"

The farmer nodded, too frightened to speak.

"And that later, when you two had become married, and had a daughter, the crop from which your livelihood comes was destroyed in a hailstorm? An unnatural hailstorm?"

Again Delbert nodded.

"And then, shortly after, a wizard came to you, knowing that you were destitute now, and offered to purchase your newborn daughter? A wizard with the same name and description as the one who had courted your wife, who, having once *again* been refused, instead of retreating to peruse anew the lore of wizards—to act in the manner a wizard should act, as did his own ancient love, Bronwyn, when she too had had her advances rebuffed by an ordinary soldier—instead wished to make your daughter his slave? To make her his property so, when she had grown up like her mother, he could have his will of her whether she wished him to do so or not?"

Once again the farmer nodded. "I-I do not know all the details, m'lady, as you seem to do. B-but, yes, this Mage Humfrey . . ."

"Enough!" a voice shouted. A voice that rocked the chamber like thunder, drowning out even the clashing of tools from the workmen outside. A whirlwind appeared in the space before the bench, flashing as if it were filled with blue lightning. Again thunder crackled.

And then, as quickly as it had come, the whirlwind vanished, leaving in its place a man. A man who was short and overly plump, with bent arms and legs and a shock of hair that was a deep auburn color.

"H-Humfrey?" Rowen asked. She almost giggled. She knew she was frightened, deathly frightened—even with the distance between them, she could feel his power—yet she almost giggled. In his appearance, the wizard *was* toadlike.

"Enough," he said again, this time in a much quieter voice as the College wizards began to come forward. "Yes, I do admit it. I caused the hailstorm. Yes, I desired the love of Alysoun, who, as you saw yourself, somewhat resembles my first love, Bronwyn. And, yes, I wished to buy her daughter—not, as the farmer claims, in some illegal way, but with everything perfectly lawful so, as you say, if I couldn't have willingly the love of one, at least, in time, I could compel the other."

He turned then to the wizards, who had started to form a circle around him. "You. You, Aubric. You, headmaster. You keep your distance—this is not a Wizards' Court. And as for you, Mistress Rowen," he said, "you may have gained some satisfaction this day. But what do you intend to *do* about it?"

Rowen turned white. It hadn't occurred to her until this moment, but what *would* she do? Or must she do anything? Then the headmaster stepped forward, nodding gravely.

"Justice Sunderson," he said. "Mage Humfrey is correct. We have no power ourselves in the case of Farmer Delbert, although we can do this much. We can make sure there are no repercussions. That Mage Humfrey will cause no further harm to the farmer, nor to his wife or their daughter, nor anyone else in this chamber including you and Mistress Rowen. That is something we can do as wizards. We can convene our own court if need be, should Mage Humfrey be unwilling in this. But in the matter of Delbert's crop damage, it was he who insisted on bringing it to the king's justice, and so it is in the king's jurisdiction, not that of our College."

"I understand," Justice Sunderson said. He beckoned for Rowen to come forward.

"Mistress Rowen," he whispered, "first off, I must thank you. In that Mage Humfrey has himself confessed—and I marvel that you were able to cause it so easily—I can find him guilty. That much *I* can do. But he is right as well. What do we do next? That is, I can order recompense for Farmer Delbert, but what if he refuses to give it?"

Rowen shook her head. "I don't know, your lordship. As for the confession, I took a chance that I could insult him—that he had not taken on the cognomen 'The Proud' for nothing. But as you heard the headmaster say, it is not we but you who must decide how to enforce the law."

Justice Sunderson shook his head sadly, then gestured toward the packed rear of the chamber, a sea of faces on which, for the most part, the fear of only moments before had turned back to anger. Then he gestured to the window, out of which Rowen could see the workmen in the square building fires underneath great cauldrons propped up on platforms and emptying yet other cauldrons into curious structures of brick lined with packed sand.

"Mistress Rowen," he said, "you can see the anger of the townspeople. They have never trusted wizards greatly, and now, if they cannot see justice fulfilled in the case of this Humfrey, their anger may explode into violence."

"I realize that," Rowen said. "But we are wizards. We can protect ourselves."

"Yes," the justice said, "if it were just this town. Peasants with pitchforks, like Farmer Delbert. But as I said earlier, this case has gained attention elsewhere, including the king's palace. It won't be peasants and townspeople only."

"Wh-what do you mean?" Rowen asked, again feeling the nervousness of a young wizard scarcely beyond her own apprenticeship.

"You saw the workmen. They're casting brass to make cannons, mis-

treass. Cannons to support the king's army. The king himself has taken an interest and, depending on what we do here, may order his army, with cannons and more, to exterminate wizards throughout his kingdom. To even attack your College itself."

"I see," Rowen said. "A moment, then, please." She shut her eyes, concentrating her thoughts, then *sent* to the wizards still assembled surrounding Mage Humfrey the import of what the justice had told her. A moment later Mage Humfrey himself stepped up to the bench, pulling a large pouch out of his clothing.

"Have the peasant come here," he said. He waited until the sheriff had Delbert brought to the bench. "I think this will do," he said, casting the pouch at the farmer's feet. "Gold means nothing to me. But realize I only do even this much because my colleagues have asked me politely, recognizing my station among them."

"Very well," Justice Sunderson said. "I shall have the sheriff help Farmer Delbert count up the amount, but if it is sufficient to cover the price of his lost crop, plus his trouble in bringing his case here, the law should be satisfied. That is, if Farmer Delbert is willing . . ."

The farmer spoke up. "I am not, m'lord. Not yet. Before my wife and my child I have been humiliated. The gold will help, yes. It will cover my lost crop. But I must have an apology also."

The justice nodded. "Mage Humfrey?" he asked.

The wizard's face was already turning as red as his hair. "*Never!*" he shouted. "I? I, a wizard, steeped since a child in the learning of centuries, of wisdom both West and East, grovel before this . . . this dung-stinking farmer? I, Humfrey le Fier?"

"I insist upon it!" the farmer screamed back. "Yes, I, just a farmer. . . ."

The justice struck his bench with both fists. "This is my court," he said. "And this session is not completed yet. Both of you, silence. Delbert, you may sit again. Mage Humfrey, I ask on your honor that you go back to your fellow wizards and remain with them in this chamber until I have made a ruling."

He motioned to Rowen.

"Mistress?" he asked.

"It seems you have a problem," she whispered. "We have a problem. Mage Humfrey is proud—but so is our farmer."

"Farmer Delbert is within his rights," the justice said. "I can order Mage Humfrey to say he's sorry for what he did, but if the wizard still refuses, how can I compel him? Can I have the sheriff seize his property as a surety for his compliance? I dare say you wizards have wards against *that*. Or can I order a writ of arrest, to seize his person until he assents when all he would need is to cast a spell to burst out of the strongest gaol? If you were in my boots, what would you do, mistress?"

In spite of herself Mistress Rowen giggled. "Rather your robes and your wig," she replied, "as unbecoming as both items are." She thought

a moment. She looked out the window, then down at her own gown, out of fashion as it was yet still not without charm. "I may have an idea," she said to the justice. "Those workmen outside, casting brass for their cannons. Can you, as king's justice, request their labor in service of your court?"

"Yes," the justice said.

"Good," Mistress Rowen said. "And can you recess this court for three days if I can pledge myself against Mage Humfrey's return at that time? That is, I am dressed, just as Delbert's wife is, in a way that resembles that of his real love Bronwyn. And I too am comely. And he being proud, if I make him a wager that we *can* compel him to satisfy Delbert or, if we should fail, I will be his prize."

Again the court chamber was packed with townspeople and, this time, with men from the king's palace also, as well as with wizards, so full the latecomers spilled into the square outside. So full that Sheriff Laidley was forced to have soldiers make a path for Mistress Rowen, again dressed old fashionedly in the clothing from her apprenticeship, that which both Mage Humfrey and Justice Sunderson seemed to admire. She looked at the faces that pressed around her and saw expectation—not yet anger. And looking again, the familiar blue flash.

She waited through the preliminaries, the calling of the session to order, the standings and sittings tradition required. The recognition of Delbert as plaintiff. The call to the bench of both her and the farmer. A whispered conference. And then the sheriff called for Mage Humfrey.

The townspeople by now were used to the lightning, the thunder, the whirlwind as Humfrey appeared, a smile on his face, before the bench.

"As I have promised on my honor, I have returned to hear your decision, Justice Sunderson," he said. He leered at Rowen, whom he stood next to. "And having had no second thoughts on apologies," he continued, "to collect my forfeit."

"I see," the justice said. "Mistress Rowen?"

"Mage Humfrey," Rowen said, "I had hoped the passage of time would be sufficient for you to have changed your mind. But if it is not, well, I too did promise. But first I need to speak to the justice—about some details that are still left over. Would you object to waiting for me in his private chambers?"

"If it will not be long," Mage Humfrey said as he strode to the door she pointed to.

"Only as long as it takes," she said. "Not too long, I think. Would you like a candle?"

Mage Humfrey laughed, then entered the unlit room. "Me? A candle?"

Rowen laughed too, a ladylike giggle. "Of course not, Mage Humfrey, since you can make light at will. Now, would you please close the door behind you?"

Mage Humfrey did so, and Rowen sighed—a sigh of relief. She watched as the sheriff fastened the door shut, then turned toward the justice. “You had the workmen do as I ordered, I trust?” she said. “In every detail?”

“In every detail,” Justice Sunderson said. “And now you say he is safely confined?”

“Observe,” she said as a sudden dim flash of blue light appeared in the cracks around the door, then, just as suddenly, went back to blackness.

“Good,” the justice said. Then, in a louder voice, “It is the order of this court that Mage Humfrey be confined to my private chambers until he beg pardon of Farmer Delbert. Can the mage hear me?”

A muffled curse came from the still sealed door, then another glimmering of a blue flash accompanied by thunder.

“I think he does hear you,” Mistress Rowen said. “So, as I ordered, the room has been lined with the brass the workmen had brought for their cannon, all four walls as well as the ceiling and the floor? And all the brass polished?”

“As if the entire chamber were a huge mirror,” the justice said. “Or—what did you say Eastern wizards call it?”

“A djinni’s bottle, my lord,” Rowen answered, “in which its magic, the light that accompanies it, cannot escape but rather reflects on itself and is nullified. And so the djinni cannot escape either.”

Again there was the hint of a blue flash, the tiniest overflow through the cracks of the tight-fitting door, and a muffled rumble.

Rowen closed her eyes. “I think he’s saying that we can’t do this.” She opened them again and looked out over the crowd that packed the rear of the chamber. “Is the College headmaster present?”

The master of the Wizards’ College stood up and bowed toward the bench. “If it please the court,” he said, “I must first congratulate Mistress Rowen. And yes, she *can* do this. Mage Humfrey entered the room of his own will and closed the door of his own will as well. Thus it is not in our jurisdiction to interfere with this court.”

Once again there was a sound of thunder, a tiny trace of blue.

“But,” the headmaster continued, “if I might make a small suggestion?”

The justice nodded. “Come forward,” he said.

“I wish first, then,” the headmaster answered, “to have a brief word with Farmer Delbert.”

Rowen watched with Justice Sunderson as the workmen stripped the last of the polished brass plating from the room’s ceiling. “Now it will go back to the capital and the king’s armory?” she asked.

The justice nodded. He looked so much younger without his robes and his wig, Rowen thought, but just in his close-fitted shirt and trousers. Even if she still had on her old fashioned gown.



"And not be used here to make cannon out of?"

The justice again nodded. "It seems we've done well, Mistress Rowen," he said. "I think we've regained at least some of the trust that used to hold between people and wizards. At least for now. And your College headmaster was quite wise, I thought, suggesting a compromise that would help salve Mage Humfrey's pride, that in exchange for a full apology—added, of course, to the gold for his barley—Farmer Delbert would not stand in his daughter's way if, when she comes of age, she of her own will should wish to consort with the wizard."

The justice paused for a moment—what seemed a long moment to Rowen. "And of course," he finally added with the hint of a smile, "I am glad as well that your pledge wasn't forfeit."

"As am I, your lordship. But what will you do now? That is, I don't often come into town, but will you continue to preside at this court?"

"No, Mistress Rowen. I'm a circuit justice, you see. I have to go back to the capital first, to attend on His Majesty, then go to whatever town he sends me to, to try whatever case may next be found that, for whatever reason, is beyond the scope of its local council. In that sense I'm somewhat like your own headmaster. And you, Mistress Rowen, what will you be doing?"

Rowen laughed out loud before he had even finished his question—she couldn't help it—then felt herself turn scarlet. Not at all like the College of Wizards' headmaster, she thought, so stiff and ancient, not at all like him even when Justice Sunderson sat in his wig and his court robe. And certainly not like him now when the justice—Giles—stood at his ease in his private chamber.

And then, in her mind's eye, she saw him, too, standing before the king at his court, in the latest fashion they wore at the capital. Standing, tightly dressed in hose and doublet, and thought, without willing it, of Mistress Bronwyn who had loved a soldier.

And then her own business—well, what would she be doing? Times *were* changing. Yes, there was trust now among the townspeople, but as the justice had seemed to hint himself, how long would that last? And, too, hadn't Master Aubric spoken before of a need for bridges?

She saw herself with the portrait of Bronwyn before the packed chamber, the farmer's wife Alysoun standing beside her, herself dressed as Bronwyn, and thought of—what was the old fashioned word that King's Courts used for it? For Humfrey and Delbert's wife. Humfrey and Bronwyn. Bronwyn and soldiers.

Herself and Giles Sunderson?

*Precedent*, yes. She would have much to learn of this business of King's Law, but her mentor Aubric had always told her she was a quick study.

And then, again turning red, she stammered, "P-perhaps your lordship might use an apprentice?" □

# BORROWING TROUBLE

Wendy Leeds



**"L**et me tell you about the Brownings."

My neighbor Cynthia checked her glossy lipstick in the back of my silver spoon, then poured a packet of diet sweetener into her decaf. "I'm glad you finally got some more Sweet & Slim, Angie. A girl can't be too careful about her figure."

She patted her own impressive curves to prove her point.

"Help yourself," I said, as always,

and Cynthia stuffed a handful of packets in her pocket, as always.

"So, what about the Brownings?" I settled my own solid figure into the wing chair Cynthia had recommended for my living room and waited to hear about the people whose tennis court now backed up to my rose garden.

"They're goodlooking in a healthy kind of way—and rich," Cynthia said. "Jim was just made a full partner with Sherris and Voxen.



His wife Liz is a tennis pro. They have more money than God and practically no furniture." She lifted her eyes to the Tiffany lamp she'd talked me into buying and smiled like she'd suddenly found religion. "I told them straight out that they needed me. I explained that when you buy an estate like theirs, in a neighborhood like ours, you have to hire a trained decorator to come in to make sure you do things right." Cynthia licked her lips at the thought of working with clients who had money to burn. "When I told them I was available, they said to come by and see what I could do for them.

"Of course they were busy moving in, so we just chatted briefly." She took a sip of her decaf and added more faux sugar to the mix. "But when the movers unpacked this wonderful crystal vase, I made such a fuss over it they insisted I borrow it. Right away I thought of how perfect your yellow roses would look with the vase. If you don't mind my borrowing some," she said, as always.

"Help yourself," I said, as always.

"If you ask me, they're going to fit right into the neighborhood." Cynthia stretched her hands out so we could both admire her glossy red nails. I folded my own plain hands out of sight. "I heard they paid just over two and a half million for the place. Can you imagine?" While she was imagining, Cynthia made a tight little face and stirred her decaf so hard the mug jiggled back and forth on my mahogany tea table.

"Some people have it so easy. The rest of us have to make our own

luck in this life." She pointed at herself. "Which is why I asked them to be my guests at the dance at the club this weekend," she said. "I think it would be nice to have some new blood around here, don't you?"

I liked the same old blood just fine, but I've never been one to rock the boat. "You don't think we'll be too dull for them?" I asked.

"Maybe you're too dull, but not me." Cynthia chuckled at the thought. "Have you ever had a boring evening when I'm around?"

I admitted I hadn't, which was what I liked about Cynthia. Nothing was ever boring when she was around.

"Don't you worry, I'll make sure they enjoy themselves." Cynthia plucked a bunch of grapes out of my centerpiece, wrapped them in a napkin, and tucked them in her pocket. "By the way, do you have an egg I could borrow? I'm fresh out."

"Help yourself," I said as Cynthia went out to my kitchen and dug around inside my refrigerator until she found my eggs.

"I'll see you tomorrow night at the club." Cradling two eggs in her left hand, she headed across the back yards toward her plain Colonial—across the street from the rest of us.

"I really don't want to go tonight," my husband Dick said, watching me roll my stockings up over my knees. "It was a long day, and I'm beat." Dick had worked his way up through the ranks to become CEO of Home-Safe, a company that sold state-of-the-art security systems, at state-of-the-art prices. It was a job

that took up most of his time and energy, which meant he didn't have much of either left over for me any more, not that I blamed him.

"Don't you want to meet the new neighbors?" I asked. "Cynthia says they're charming."

"Cynthia's a gossip who thinks everyone's charming as long as they have something she can borrow," Dick said. "You know how she cleaned out her poor old ex-husband Charlie. Now she's borrowing from us, and when she's cleaned us out, she'll move on. I don't know why you put up with her, Angie."

"Because there's always something going on when she's around."

"So?"

Dick started unbuttoning his buttoned-down oxford shirt with a sigh of pleasure.

"Cynthia always says there's nothing much going on in our lives."

"That's what I like about it," Dick said.

I smoothed my brown skirt over my beige stockings while I thought about how predictable Dick's answer was, just as predictable as everything else in my life. "You know," I said, "the Brownings paid two and a half million for that house. I know if I made that kind of investment I'd want to protect it. I'd probably be looking for someone to install a new home security system, wouldn't you?"

Dick thought about that a minute, then started rebuttoning his shirt. "I guess we could go for just awhile."

Cynthia was standing by the front door of the club, keeping tabs

on the arrivals, making sure everyone noticed her red dress, which was short and small enough to prove all her assets were entirely her own, not borrowed like my favorite diamond stud earrings, which shone brightly from her earlobes.

"I'm so glad you made it. And what a sensible outfit, Angie." She hugged me and we both kissed air. Then she hugged Dick, who didn't hug her back. "Go get yourselves a drink. I'll introduce you to the Brownings as soon as they have a minute to themselves."

While Cynthia flitted away to welcome another guest, Dick got me a glass of white zinfandel. He got himself a Manhattan, then he set out to "work the room," leaving me by the shrimp bar alone, as usual. The ballroom was packed with people who were dancing or hanging around the bar, drinking martinis so full of vermouth that I could smell them from the far end of the refreshment table over the little mushrooms and caviar.

At the other end of the room Cynthia was showing off the Brownings like they were pieces of art she'd borrowed for the occasion. They were both sleek and tall. Both were dressed in black and wore their blond hair short and swept back off their faces. Liz had a thin, angular face, with high cheekbones and a sharp, pointed nose. She had long muscular legs, broad shoulders, and the well-defined biceps of an athlete. She was smiling hard but looked like she didn't mean it.

Her husband Jim was pale and smoother than his wife. His face gleamed like he'd polished it to a

high, fine shine; his forehead reflected the light of the chandelier. He looked easy in his evening clothes, easy at being the center of attention.

I sipped my wine and was wishing I was better at mingling, when Cynthia hailed me from across the room with a big wide gesture. "Yoo-hoo, Angie! Come meet your new neighbors," she shouted over the rhumba. "They're just dying to meet you."

Jim had a firm handshake. And a nice smile. When he shook my hand, I felt a chemical reaction inside me, the kind that made me touch my wedding ring just to remind myself I was married.

"Jimmie, how about getting me a bourbon, neat." Cynthia stepped between Jim and me as if she'd read my mind and wanted to get some of that chemical reaction for herself.

"We'll have to get together some time," Jim said politely.

"Sure," I said back.

"Once we get the house done, we'll think about entertaining," Liz said without much enthusiasm. She put her hand over her husband's bicep and turned him in the direction of the vermouth.

"And that house will be a virtual showplace by the time I'm done with it." Cynthia put her hand over Liz's. "Trust me," she said.

"You should see the inside," Cynthia said two weeks later when she showed up at my back door to borrow napkins. "It's a decorator's dream-come-true. All that space to fill and all that lovely money to spend filling it. You know, they've

practically opened their checkbook to me. 'Just buy the best, don't worry about what it costs,' Jim said. 'We want this house to be right.' And they keep saying how lucky they are to have found the right person to do their house here in the neighborhood. I told them some things in life are just meant to be." Cynthia gave herself a little round of applause.

"And they're always telling me to take home anything I think they can't use any more, which I do." She took a handful of the sugar packets I buy just for her and stuffed them into her pocket. "Of course I do a little extra, to make sure they get their money's worth."

She didn't say what that extra was, and I didn't ask. There are some things it's better not to know.

"You're not seeing as much of Cynthia as you used to," Dick said one morning over breakfast.

"She's busy over at the Brownings'."

"Busy ripping them off, busy borrowing things she'll never return."

"That's not fair." I wasn't quite sure why I defended Cynthia, I just did. "She returns things."

"So, where's my screwdriver?"

"You just have to remind her. She has a bad memory."

"It's not her memory that's bad," Dick said. "That woman's a leech. She's sucked the life out of poor old Charlie and you, now she's moved on to the Brownings." Dick patted his mouth with his napkin. "I'm just glad she's busy robbing someone else blind for a change. Truth is, there's no alarm system on earth

that can protect you from a woman like that.”

I didn't really miss Cynthia, I thought as I peeked out my kitchen window. It's hard to miss someone you see out your kitchen window a hundred times a day. At seven thirty every day Cynthia arrived, clipboard in hand. At eight thirty Jim drove off in his Mercedes. By nine trucks and service vans pulled up under the back portico; men in uniforms with their names stitched over the pocket came and went.

All day long and sometimes late into the evening Cynthia came and went, lugging in fabric bolts and sample books and occasionally lugging out little things like lamps, cushions, shovels, and blenders that she was clearly borrowing on her usual permanent basis. I wondered if Liz minded that Cynthia was helping herself, but truth was, it didn't seem to bother her at all. In fact, Cynthia could probably have backed up a moving van and cleaned the house out and Liz would never have been the wiser because all she did, day in and day out, was play tennis. She showed up on their court at nine to hit ball after ball, shot out of a machine or returned by a series of lean, tanned women who never seemed to miss a ball. All day long, into the evening, rain or shine—pock, pock, pock. It was enough to drive a person crazy.

“I'm worried about Liz,” Cynthia said when she came by two weeks later to borrow some garbage bags.

“Really?” I looked up from watering my herbs.

“I'm afraid she's gone completely out of her mind. I never know what to expect from her these days. One day she's as nice as she can be, the next day she bites my head off. She's always yelling at Jim, accusing him of wanting to leave her, of having affairs with every woman that comes into the house.”

“Really?”

Cynthia lowered her voice to a whisper. “I think he's afraid of her, but he doesn't like to say so. I know I'm scared to death of her since she tried to kill me.”

“Really?” Like I said, life really was more interesting when Cynthia was around. “What happened?”

“She didn't like the clock I bought for the mantelpiece, so she threw it at me, missed me by a hair.” Cynthia raised an eyebrow like a slanty exclamation point. “A ten thousand dollar clock—ruined. And frankly I'm afraid that one of these days she's not going to miss.”

“Maybe you should tell someone about this,” I suggested.

“I'm telling you.”

Then one morning the tennis stopped. Just before noon I gave up pretending I was busy updating my old recipe file and went to the window to see what was going on out on the court, which was nothing. All day long there was only silence from next door. I tried calling over to the Brownings' to ask Cynthia if everything was okay, but their number was unlisted and Cynthia seemed so busy, rushing in and out, supervising the workmen,



I didn't want to bother her. So I just watched and waited.

Jim came home at the usual time and disappeared into the house as if nothing was amiss. The last workmen carried out some rolls of old rugs that they tossed into the dumpster before they left for the day. Just after eight Cynthia left for home wearing a big gray poncho, lugging several large, unwieldy garbage bags.

"What's up?" Dick startled me as he came in from our garage.

"Liz didn't play tennis today."

"So what?"

"I don't know. I just have a feeling something's wrong."

"Well, I have a feeling I'd like some dinner," Dick said pointedly.

"Your dinner's in the microwave. I'll heat it up while you go change." As soon as Dick started up the stairs, I picked up the phone and called Cynthia's house.

She answered on the second ring, sounding out of breath.

"What?"

"I just wondered if there was something wrong at the Brownings'." I suddenly felt foolish for worrying and for bothering Cynthia with my worries.

"What are you talking about?" She sounded distracted.

"I didn't see Liz today, and I was worried something had happened."

"You didn't see Liz because she isn't here. She's playing in a tennis tournament up north and won't be back until tomorrow sometime."

"Oh."

"Honey, you've got to stop hanging out your window watching us over there. Like I keep telling you,

you're too predictable. You need to get a life of your own."

Late the next afternoon as I was pulling into my driveway I noticed the police cruiser parked in the Brownings' driveway. Cynthia was outside talking to a pair of middle-aged officers, gesturing in a way that showed off her manicure to advantage. When I waved at her, she waved back, then came through the privet hedge.

She was so flushed with excitement that her cheeks were almost as red as her lipstick.

"When was the last time you saw Jim?" she asked.

"I saw him come home last night," I said. "Why?"

"He disappeared, and the police suspect that Liz murdered him."

"No!"

"Yes," Cynthia said. "When I got to work today, Liz was in the shower and the electrician was working in the back hall. Jim's car was in the garage, but there was no sign of him." Cynthia pointed to the back of the Brownings' garage to prove her point. "When Liz finally came downstairs, I asked her where Jim was. She said he'd gone to work. That's when I knew something was wrong." Cynthia sounded very sure of herself.

"I asked Liz how he'd gotten to work without his car, which was still in the garage. She said maybe he'd gotten a ride, and what business was it of mine. I said I was just wondering, but she got all puffed up and said I was fired. Me. Fired." Cynthia patted her chest indignantly. "She said I should get my

things and get out. Can you imagine?"

"But what about Jim?"

"No one knows what happened to him."

Cynthia looked behind her as if afraid someone was sneaking up on her. "Anyway, I was suspicious about the way Liz was acting, and when I found rust-colored spatters on the mauve wallpaper I'd chosen for the back hallway, I went ahead and called the police. They came right out, and when they saw the rug, they agreed I was onto something. They even questioned *me* about where I'd been earlier today. I told them they were barking up the wrong interior decorator. Liz and the electrician were already here when I arrived this morning, so I couldn't have possibly done anything to Jim."

"But why would Liz kill her husband?"

"It's hard to tell what a crazy woman will do."

"If they don't have a body, they don't have diddly," Dick said the next morning as he packed for a trip to Seattle. "You can't arrest someone for acting weird."

"What about the wallpaper splattered with what will probably turn out to be his blood?" I asked.

"Maybe the guy decided to take off and start a whole new life for himself. Maybe he cut himself by accident, or maybe he bled himself purposely so everyone would think he was dead, and leave him alone."

"Why would he do that?" I wasn't sure what to think any more. "He had a new house, a beautiful wife,

a successful career. What more could any man want?"

"Freedom," Dick said with such enthusiasm I gave him a second look.

"Do you think the police will arrest Liz?"

"Police will do whatever they want. But don't you go messing in this. Leave things to the police." Dick readjusted his tie. "I'll be back Tuesday."

Without a body or a murder weapon there wasn't enough evidence to charge or arrest anyone for Jim's murder—but everyone in town was laying odds that Liz had done away with her husband.

"It's just a matter of time until they arrest her because that woman's as guilty as sin," Cynthia said one morning as she sipped her usual decaf. "Whether they find the body or not, she's going to spend the rest of her natural life in jail for what she did to Jim." She stood up to go. "By the way, could I borrow some of those yellow bulbs you plant alongside your driveway every year?"

"You want to garden?" I asked, just to be sure I'd heard her right. "What about your manicure?"

"Like I always say, we should always try to expand our horizons. Besides, I'll wear gloves." She fluttered her nails past my face. "How about the bulbs?"

"I'm going to pick up some on Friday. I'll bring you some when I get them."

"Great." She took the last slice of coffee cake, wrapped it in a napkin, and put it in her pocket. "And why

don't you bring that little trowel of yours so we can plant them together."

Friday when I got back from shopping I took a dozen bulbs over to Cynthia's. I found her on her knees in her back yard digging around a new birdbath with Dick's screwdriver.

"Well, there you are." She stood and dusted her gloves off on her tight, black slacks. "I thought I'd get the ground loosened so it would be easier to plant."

"I thought I saw you borrow the Brownings' shovel. Why don't you use that?"

"I gave it back," Cynthia said.

"You gave something back?" I looked at the patch of land that had always been left to briars and brambles while Cynthia kept chattering on about how she was thinking of doing Marge's house now that she was at liberty. And I knew what had happened to Jim, with a moral certainty. "I've got to get going," I said.

"Oh?" Cynthia frowned at me.

"I'll see you later," I said without meaning it. I didn't think I'd be seeing Cynthia anytime soon.

"How did you figure it out?" Dick asked as he sat on the edge of our bed pulling off his shoes.

"I know Cynthia." I sat down in the little furrow beside him. "When she told me she'd returned the shovel, I knew she'd killed Jim."

"How?"

"I started wondering what she and Jim had been up to all those evenings while Liz was out hitting

tennis balls. Then I thought some about how we were digging in a place where you could bury anything and no one would be the wiser."

I held up a finger to count the rest of the evidence against her. "I saw two workmen carry a rolled rug out to the dumpster. I saw Cynthia carrying out garbage bags back home, which I guess explains what happened to Jim."

"What happened to him?"

"Cynthia said Liz fired her when she started asking questions about Jim, but I figure Jim had already fired Cynthia—from his bed and from his house. And you know how Cyn hates to give up anything."

Dick said he knew

"Anyway, this time she went home, got the shovel she'd borrowed from the Brownings, came back, and whacked him over the head so hard she killed him. She hacked him into pieces, had the workmen throw away the rug she'd bloodied, and threw what was left of him into the dumpster. Then she tried to pin the blame on Liz by giving back the shovel."

I leaned back on my elbows, feeling like my life was getting more interesting by the minute. "You know, she might have gotten away with it if I hadn't known her so well."

"Really." Dick looked at me like maybe I wasn't so predictable after all and the possibility intrigued him. "You mean because she borrowed the shovel and wouldn't have given it back?"

"I mean because she borrowed Liz's husband and wouldn't give him back." □

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# THE SERVICES OF AN EXPERT

Harry Stephen Keeler

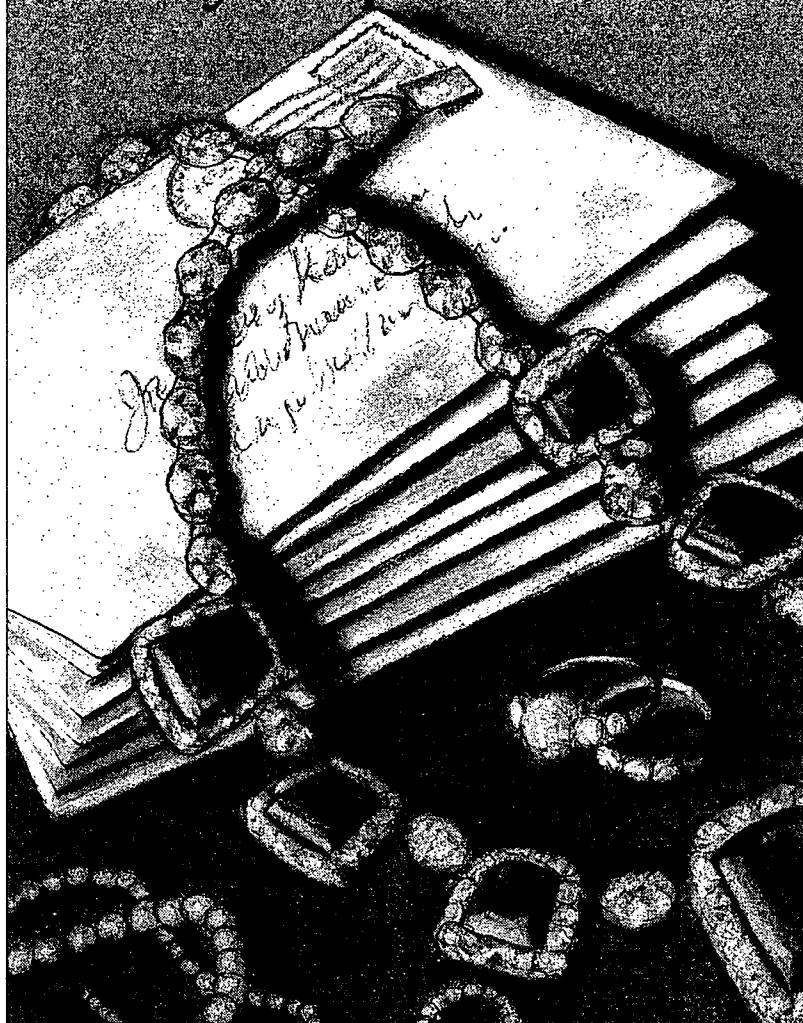


Illustration by Louise Goldenberg

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/99

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**I**t was close upon midnight.

I had just placed my silk hat on the rack that hung at the side of the room when I heard the slight sounds coming from the direction of the fire escape. Then I detected the shadow on the window pane.

I paused in the act of removing my gloves and felt quickly for my back pocket. My revolver was there.

So I stood very quietly in the darkness and watched the man on the iron framework outside as he fumbled a moment and then raised the window. Since a small patch of moonlight, now outlined on the rug, acted as a weak source of illumination, I drew further back in the shadow of the door.

After thrusting one leg over the sill, the intruder drew in the rest of his body. For an instant he stood, glancing with uncertainty at the raised window back of him.

Then it was that I slid my right hand carefully along the wall until my fingers came in contact with the electric light switch. With my left I drew out the small nickel-plated revolver that I have always with me for cases of emergency.

"Hands up!" I said calmly—and snapped on the incandescents.

He thrust his hands instantly above his head and stood blinking in the sudden flood of light. I had opportunity then, for the first time, to survey him from head to foot.

He was a small and rather stockily built individual clad in a checkered suit; his face could be aptly described by the phrase "roly-poly." On his head reposed a derby hat and, dropping from his collar, was a gorgeously red tie that lent the final touch to his general appearance of flashiness.

"Well," I remarked, advancing toward him with weapon still extended, "what's your game, my man?"

He seemed to be yet dazed by the sudden turn of affairs for him. After a pause, he spoke.

"My game? Well—to tell you the truth—I don't just know. A minute ago I was sliding in that window back of me . . . and now . . . I seem to be . . . well . . . just waiting . . . for something to happen."

"Don't worry," I answered grimly, "it'll happen." I stepped toward the phone that stood on the table, watching him all the while. He didn't blink an eye. So I stopped.

"I suppose you're one of these fly-by-night birds known as second-story men, eh?" My voice took on a more sarcastic tone. "Or perhaps you're only walking in your sleep now. In a short while you'll wake up and declare it's some terrible mistake. Or possibly you've stumbled into the wrong house by error?"

His upraised arms were losing their rigidity. To satisfy myself as to

whether he was armed, I stepped over to him and inserted my hand into each one of his pockets in turn. He had no weapons, however.

"All right," I said. "Let 'em down." I went over to the window, closed it, and drew down the shade. Then I returned to the table and dropped into the swivel chair, beckoning him at the same time into the straight-backed chair that stood directly across. "Sit down," I commanded. "Before I turn you over to the police, I'll have a little talk with you. Do you know where you are? Do you know whose apartment you're in?"

"Well," he replied, "the name on the doorbell downstairs says Mr. Peter J. Dawson."

Probably I was goading him with my remarks far more than was necessary as I answered:

"You're quite observing, I'm sure. I presume then, that since the doings of successful private criminal investigators and their families are of such interest to our newspapers, you were merely one of many who happened to read in the *Chicago Despatch* that Mrs. Dawson left yesterday for Atlantic City and that her illustrious husband, solver of the famous Wrangley counterfeiting case, the Abe Shaffner bond theft, the Cissy Rogers murder, and other bizarre little puzzles forming part of our social fabric, was to leave the city this morning to direct the work on the Clyley kidnapping case at Cincinnati. Put a little too much faith in newspaper data this time, though, didn't you? How could you be certain, for instance, that Millionaire Clyley didn't alter his plans at the last moment about whom he'd employ to help him find his missing daughter? What could you know of telegrams that might have passed since that news story was published?" I paused. "Such nice plans as you have, too. Of course you made sure, by telephoning first, that the servant was away too—Heaven knows where?"

He bit out his reply in short, angry words. "Say! If you're going to turn me over, hurry up and do it. I'm not going to sit here and listen to all your gaff."

"Here, here," I said, "don't get huffy, my good sir. Even though I represent a phase of society that's not at all liked by your ilk, I can still be a very good fellow—a very good fellow at times—in fact, this is the one time of your life that you want to cultivate my friendship, of all persons." I watched him narrowly. Then I continued quizzing him.

"Confess, though, now . . . you just strolled in, as it were, to see whether any of the famous Dawson diamonds, achieved as rewards for an honorable career of hunting thieves much bigger than yourself, were lying around loose? They were most accurately described, I believe, in the newspaper account of the big dinner party last week, weren't they? How about it?"

His answer was noncommittal, to say the least.

"I'm not confessing anything of the sort. Ring up the cops and be



done with it." He laughed an odd little laugh. "All the good cells'll be filled up with drunks in another hour. It's midnight now."

The more I thought of our unusual situation, the more I felt that this man could possibly prove very valuable to me. My questioning now took on a definite trend.

"What's your particular specialty, if I may make so bold as to inquire? My experience, I'll confess, has been with a higher order of criminals than yourself. It seems really a rare treat to talk with a real second-story man; or are you perhaps a porch climber? or a lock-picker? or a stickup man? or maybe even a safeblower?"

"For example," I went on, "assuming that the jewelry you're looking for is over there in that iron box," and I pointed toward the massive safe that stood in the corner of the room, "just what, may I ask, was your method of procedure to be?"

"For the last time," he said wearily, "I'm telling you I'm not talking."

I was quite determined, though, to continue along the line on which I had already started.

"Ah yes!" I remarked soothingly, "but you must talk. I feel a rather charitable impulse running through my veins this evening—an impulse that prompts me to be a trifle lenient with you. What do you know about safes?"

For the first time he betrayed a little interest.

"Oh, I know a little about 'em," he replied. "For instance—that one—over there—" He motioned toward the corner of the room. "I could tell you a few things about it—just from where I sit. That's one of the earlier ones put out by the International Burglar-proof Safe and Lock Company of Utica, New York. That's their type . . ." He wrinkled his brow and pondered a moment. ". . . 36 B."

Things were shaping up better than I had expected. My voice must have shown the satisfaction I felt. "Good. You are quite an educated fellow in your line. Now, that safe belongs to my wife. Not a soul knows the combination of it but herself. I frankly confess I don't. Is a safe like that really burglar-proof? Could you open it, all alone, unaided?"

He crossed his legs. "I daresay I could," he returned, gazing at me through eyes that had become mere slits. "For you see it happens to be all in the way you spin your dial around and listen for the tumblers dropping into place." He inserted his thumbs jauntily in his armholes and commenced to whistle a gay little tune. "But I don't intend to try," he added.

Obviously this was the man I required. I dropped my tone of banter and spoke seriously.

"Now—as a sporting proposition—and because I've never seen such a person as yourself actually work in front of my eyes—if you could demonstrate your ability by opening yon strongbox in—say—five min-

utes—not a second more, you understand—I'd be careless enough to shut my eyes and let you walk out of here through the same fire escape window you came in."

Exultantly he rose to his feet.

"Say—are you dead in earnest? Are you on the square about that proposition? D'you mean it? Will you let me walk out o' here if I can jiggle that combination open?"

"Certainly," I assured him. "Of course I mean it. Can you do it?"

"I can make a try of it," he said, walking toward the safe. Then he glanced over it.

The silence was suddenly broken by the sharp ringing of the telephone bell which stood on the library table at the side of the room.

I ignored it.

Then it rang a second time.

The little man returned to the table and stood waiting, with his hands in his pockets.

"Going t' answer?" he inquired.

"Let it ring," I replied curtly.

He watched me closely, his face breaking slowly into a grin. Then he leveled his forefinger directly at me and launched forth into a scathing speech.

"Huh!" he exclaimed. "I'm a little next to you now. You're afraid to answer that phone. May I ask just why you don't want anybody t' know you were home in your apartment t'night—on the night of June the twenty-fifth—while the lady o' th' house is in the East—while you're supposed to be on a train going to a big case in Cincinnati? Eh? What's coming off here t'night? What's your game—Mr.—Mr.—Dawson?" At this point he evidently ran out of either breath or denunciatory ideas.

That cursed phone then rang for the third time. I was not only quite flustered now—but angry as well. "That's enough from you," I growled.

His accusing forefinger was still pointed at me as the phone bell rang for the fourth—and what proved to be the last—time. He must have taken great delight in making me squirm, for he started off again.

"You've got something shady scheduled here for t'night. I always knew the police were as crooked as the crooks. You don't *dare* answer that phone. When you get ready t' let me into your little game, then maybe I'll do your dirty work. Not until." He sank into the straight-backed chair and stared at the window in back of me.

I glanced cautiously behind me, realizing that this rascal was perhaps playing for time. A suspicion crossed my mind that possibly a confederate was posted near the grounds. But we were quite alone. For about a minute I thought on the matter. This man had arrived at a crucial moment for me. Without doubt, it seemed best that I render a detailed explanation to him if I wished to placate him—especially in

view of the fact that the telephone had complicated matters as it had. So I leaned back in my chair and began, picking my words with care.

"I'm going to let you in on a family secret now. Of course, I'm quite safe—and likewise, I don't have to do it. If I wish, I can turn you over any minute, and the little tale you might tell I could brand as a lie pure and simple. But in some respects you're a valuable man to me tonight. You can do me a big service. In return, I do you the bigger service—of saving you from five or ten years in the Joliet penitentiary.

"Now, pay attention," I commanded. "I'm looking for something in my wife's safe. No, not specifically her diamonds—except in a certain sense. It's a packet of letters—a packet that means more to me than the diamonds themselves. And I've got to get that packet.

"No doubt," I went on, "you've often read in the newspapers of some of the rich rewards I've received in the bigger cases I've worked successfully on. And I've been like a gambler, for when rewards were big, I've salted most of 'em away in diamonds. I made one fatal mistake, though: I gave all of mine, as fast as I accumulated them, to my wife. It's all she cares for—all she could ever see."

He was paying strict attention to my words, so I continued, punctuating my remarks with emphatic gestures of my clenched fists.

"That is, my friend, it's all she could ever see till—till these last few months—till she met this parlor lizard that she's fallen for. Oh yes, she's had an affair. She's received letters, and she's written them, too; and the ones that she's written which have come back to her because of his being eternally on the move, she's faithfully put away in that private safe of hers till she could give 'em into his own dear hands. Fool that she was, to think she could carry on an affair under the very nose of a criminal investigator." I paused. "Well, to chop the story short, she's got my fortune—a hundred thousand dollars' worth in rings and geegaws—all hoarded up in that safe of hers like a miser. Sticking tighter to 'em than a barnacle sticks to the bottom of a mud scow.

"And I—well, I'm just a sucker—the benighted husband. Minus his fortune, minus the evidence to get a divorce with—for she's got to give me my freedom. I can stand most anything but this—being made a laughingstock of. I've still a chance to make a happy play for life with some good, right sort of girl.

"She—my wife—left this morning for a trip to Atlantic City. That part of the statement in the Chicago *Despatch* was quite true. She doesn't dream that I even suspect. The servant went to visit a sick sister. And I—well, I'm on a train bound for Cincinnati to go to work on the Clyley kidnapping case . . . not! . . . are you wise now? Millionaire Clyley—my old friend—is simply helping me out a bit, that's all.

"Instead, I'm back here in the apartment tonight, reconnoitering—looking over the land—figuring out whether I could procure tools from

some of the joints I know in the underworld, come back tomorrow night, and drill, saw, hack, punch, or chisel my way into that strong-box and get that evidence that will give me my freedom—and those diamonds that belong to me—not to her. Oh, I'll take care of her all right. I'll be fair with her. I'll give her some sort of alimony. But I've got to protect myself." I paused. "That's the situation, my friend. And along comes yourself—an expert in your line. Do you see now what I need you for? Can you help me out? If you can, you're a free man." I leaned back and mopped my forehead. I had talked for five straight minutes.

If I had expected sympathy, however, I failed woefully in my expectations. He was coldly calculating—nothing more.

"You got some Jane on the string that you want to marry, haven't you?" he said caustically.

"No jane," I returned.

"I doubt it," he said. He paused, thinking. "Now I'm talking business," he added. "What's there in all this for me?"

So far as I could see, there was no necessity for me to dicker with this fellow, since it was quite evident that I had the upper hand. So my reply was short and to the point.

"Not a red cent."

He seemed still inclined to argue. "Pretty hard bargain, I call it."

I was becoming impatient. The unpleasant thought of a possible confederate, in the hope of whose assistance he was delaying matters, again entered my mind. "To my way of thinking," I remarked, "it's a pretty easy bargain."

"Well," he returned, "what guarantee have I got that you'll let me go if I do the job—that is—if I can?"

Really, the man's stubbornness was aggravating. "Numskull," I said, restraining myself with difficulty from shouting at him, "if I can get at that property, which all came from my own pockets in the first place, it's to my decided advantage that you, the mysterious burglar, get away. I'll account for my possession of the divorce evidence by saying I bought it outright from the man who brought it to me. As for you, it's to your undeniable benefit to keep a quiet tongue in your head afterward. Then, too, haven't you my promise—my word of honor?"

He did not lose the opportunity to deliver a thrust.

"A lot o' faith," he jeered, "I'd put in the word of honor of a guy that'd steal from his own wife so's to marry some jane he's struck on. I don't believe that story about Mrs. Dawson and this parlor lizard. You're making that up. Say," he finished with a leer, "aren't you yourself the Gay Lothario in this case? And aren't you one of those things called Indian-Givers?"

This was going just a little too far, I decided. I was commencing to feel decidedly wrathful, so I determined to use up no more valuable time

discussing the offer. "We're wasting precious moments," I said sharply. "What do you intend to do? Is it this—or the police?"

Evidently he realized that he was hardly in a position to do otherwise than comply with my wishes.

"I'll make the best of it," was his reply. "My copper friend—you're a mighty hard man to deal with—and if anything goes wrong—don't blame it on anybody but yourself." He paused. "Well—here's where I get down to work. I never use tools. Too crude." He removed his coat.

I watched him with interest, wondering how on earth he could open a supposedly burglar-proof safe without an instrument of any kind. I had heard of his kind, but never so far as I could remember had I met up with an authentic case of a "tumbler-feeler." He seemed, however, quite self-confident.

He folded up his coat and deposited it on the chair which he had occupied. Then he unfastened each cuff and turned it back, clear to the elbow. He glanced at me. "Say, friend," he queried, "if I can do it, don't I get one little jewel for myself—say, a little half-carat ring?"

Seeing the preparations he had already gone to, I had not been inclined to yield jot nor tittle. His persistence, though, had exhausted my patience. I plunged my hand into my pocket and brought forth the only bill that there was on my person—a crisp yellow fifty—which I flung on the table without a word. He seized it cheerfully and tucked it in his vest pocket.

After all—what did a mere fifty dollars matter? The difference between his remuneration and mine was too great.

He walked slowly over to the safe and rapped on its sides and top with his knuckles. Then, with great mysteriousness, he wet the tips of his fingers, one at a time, on his tongue and wiped them on his rolled-up sleeves. He stooped over.

Then he went through a series of puzzling actions. At times he spun the dial. At other times he worked it slowly, pressing his ear close to the iron door and listening with a faraway look on his face. Occasionally he glanced in my direction out of the corner of his eye.

For nearly a minute I watched him. Then, since it was summertime and the room had begun to feel stifling, I stepped casually over to the window, raised the shade, and opened it to its full extent, letting in a refreshing breeze from Lake Michigan. This accomplished, I turned around to see how my expert was coming along with his task.

Great Caesar's Horn Spoon!—

While my back was turned, he had quietly succeeded in swinging open the door of the safe and had extracted therefrom a huge blue-steel revolver which, in less than a second, he had raised, pointed in my direction, and fired with a thundering report great enough to wake twenty neighborhoods.

I dropped flat to the floor and lay still as a log.

Hurt? Not a bit of it! He probably missed me by a mile—but I was taking no chances of receiving another broadside from that villainous-looking weapon. While I lay prone, never moving, he stood stock-still for a quarter of a minute. Then, with four giant strides, he cleared half the room and landed in the swivel chair with his back to me.

Cautiously I raised my head. Silently I regained my knees and feet. I tiptoed backward a step to the window and out on the fire escape, where I crouched down, watching the little man in the swivel chair.

Excitedly, he was jerking the receiver hook of the phone up and down. Finally he must have roused Central, for I heard him say: "H'llo—h'llo—'lo—North Shore Police Station, please—"

After the lapse of a few seconds he must have obtained his connection for he shouted into the transmitter, "Station? Police Station? North Shore? All right. Shoot an ambulance or a doctor and a squad in a red-hot hurry to 725 Franklin Road—the second apartment—the Dawsons' apartment. I've wounded 'r killed a man. Killed him, I guess. Nope, don't know him—was on my way to Cincinnati and saw the headlines in the late papers announcing the Clyley girl had been found, so came back on home—had lost my latchkey—came up by fire escape—found him here—yes! yes! yes!—oh, hello, cap, sure—this is Dawson himself speaking—sure—yes, Peter J. Dawson."

I had heard enough. I slid silently down the iron fire escape ladder and hastened forth into the night, my last two dimes jingling as I ran.

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## SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER "UNSOLVED":

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Fred Queen killed Clem Raber.

| ARRIVED | HUSBAND AND WIFE      | STATE       | MANUFACTURED  |
|---------|-----------------------|-------------|---------------|
| Mon.    | Elmo and Lily O'Dare  | Tennessee   | wool socks    |
| Tue.    | Clem and Jill Raber   | Wisconsin   | boots         |
| Wed.    | Bert and Helen Monroe | S. Carolina | ski pants     |
| Thur.   | Dave and Ginny Newton | Texas       | undergarments |
| Fri.    | Fred and Ida Queen    | Virginia    | sweaters      |
| Sat.    | Andy and Kate Palmer  | Utah        | jackets       |



# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**E**lizabeth George continues her Scotland Yard series with **In Pursuit of the Proper Sinner** (Bantam, \$25.95). The setting is Derbyshire, where two bodies are found within an ancient circle of stones. One is the adult daughter of an early mentor of the C.I.D.'s Thomas Lynley's; the other is a young hustler from London. Under normal circumstances, Lynley and his street-smart sergeant, Barbara Havers, would work separately in the two locations. But the times are not usual: Lynley is angry and exasperated with Havers, and her insistence that the investigation is leading them into a different path altogether is not making the usually patient Lynley any happier with his sidekick. As always, George carefully develops a large cast of characters, and the Lynley-Havers conflict is just one thread in a complex tapestry of greed, pride, family loyalty, and extortion. A rich read.

In **A Clue for the Puzzle Lady** (Bantam, \$23.95), Parnell Hall debuts a fresh series with an engaging sleuthing duo, Cora Felton and her niece Sherry Carter, who are relatively new residents in the burg of Bakerhaven. Even so, Cora, the "Puzzle Lady," is already well-known for her nationally syndicated crossword puzzle column and for her love of card-playing, drinking, and gadding about—not to mention her TV commercial endorsing a breakfast cereal. So when a murder victim is found in the local cemetery with a planted clue that seems to belong in a crossword, Police Chief Dale Harper pays the resident cruciverbalist a visit (much to his ultimate chagrin). Add in several locals equal to Cora in sheer eccentricity, a handsome young reporter, and some snappy one-liners, and you have a lighthearted romp through a small town murder investigation.

Jeffery Deaver's **The Devil's Teardrop** (Simon & Schuster, \$25) is a serial-killer thriller sure to win over the most jaded reader. Parker Kincaid is a documents examiner and former FBI agent who quit the Bureau so he could work from his home and care for his two kids as a single parent. It's the Christmas season, but there's little peace on Kin-

caid's part of the earth. A clever, conniving psychopath has devised an extortion scheme in partnership with a remorseless killer known only as Digger. They've already killed and injured a number of innocent strangers, and they will continue to do so until they get their payoff. In addition, Kincaid's ex-wife is threatening to sue for custody of the children, and his involvement with this high-profile case endangers his position. However, Kincaid's puzzle-solving abilities may be the only way to checkmate a mass murderer. Look to Deaver for originality in his characters, an intricate plot, breathtaking pace, and a shocker of an ending.

Scotland Yard Inspector Ian Rutledge, a shell-shocked World War I veteran, is Charles Todd's protagonist in **Search the Dark** (St. Martin's, \$24.95). Rutledge has recovered enough to return to his old post at the Yard, but he hasn't come back to England alone: he travels with Hamish MacLeod, the insistent and often critical voice in his head that once belonged to a foot soldier whom Rutledge executed for desertion. To this sad and wounded figure—the intelligent and compassionate Rutledge—add Todd's intriguing premise, a number of fully drawn characters, and a detailed picture of post-war Dorset, and you have a mesmerizing mystery that offers a journey off the beaten path.

Alice Blanchard's **Darkness Peering** (Bantam, \$23.95) is grim, compelling, and surprising up to the final pages. In Flowering Dogwood, Maine, the murder of a retarded teenager has gone unsolved for eighteen years. Rachel Storrow doesn't know it, but her beloved police chief father killed himself that long-ago summer rather than arrest his own son Billy for the murder. Rachel has now grown up to be a detective; her dad's young patrolman has become the chief; and Billy is employed at the local school for the handicapped. But violence of an especially nasty sort touches the young woman who heads up the school where Billy works. The key to the victim's fate lies in the past, perhaps even with her father, a wealthy and respected physician. Opening up the past, however, leads Rachel to reinvestigate the murder of that teenager so long ago and unveil the secrets that led to her own father's death. Strong writing sets this psychological suspense novel apart from the crowd.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The June Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Honorable mentions go to J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; C. T. Landry of LaPlace, Louisiana; Karen G. Spisak of Tampa, Florida; Greg Matejek of Belle Mead, New Jersey; Jan Streilein of Aiken, South



Carolina; E. B. Parkell of San Francisco, California; Bee Jackson of El Cajon, California; James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; M. Lilly Welsh of Oakton, Virginia; Kathy Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts; Laurie Hill of Brookline, New Hampshire; and Richard Howard of Conway, Arizona.

Hulton Getty/Tony Stone Images

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## ANTICIPATING YOUR VISIT by Robert Kesling

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Dear George and Emmaline,

Naturally we were excited to receive your unexpected letter saying you will be free to visit us with your five darling children, your Uncle Amos, and your Newfoundland dog. Anne and I haven't been well this spring, and your visit will do wonders to cheer us up.

All the flowers hereabouts were killed by the blight, which also destroyed grass on local golf courses. No need to bring your camera or golf clubs.

Authorities have tried to keep secret the horrible outbreak of bubonic plague here. They claim it's transmitted by fleas carried by the giant rats, which seem to be everywhere. Some rats also have rabies; their bites are frequently fatal. You folks should also avoid the poisonous spiders, very prevalent this season. Undertakers are offering family rates.

You asked about fishing, George. The only fish anyone has seen this year are dead ones littering the beach.

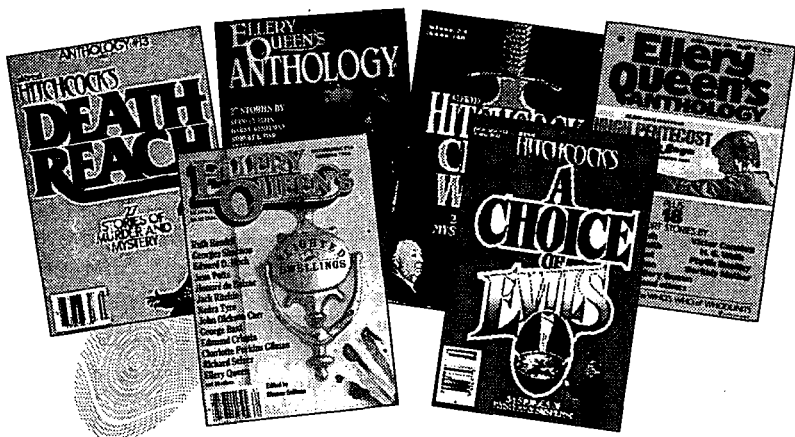
Neighborhood septic tanks overflowed during recent storms, so Anne is boiling extra drinking water in anticipation of your visit. Despite the swarms of mosquitoes, we'll have a wonderful time!

As always,  
Ralph

P.S. Please bring your sleeping bags. Mildew ruined all our extra mattresses.

P.P.S. Perhaps I should warn you that Anne's Cousin Cedric now lives with us, spending his days sitting atop a tall ladder in the shrubbery, poised to attack strangers with his pitchfork. Otherwise he's usually harmless, and—with any luck—we'll convince him you're friendly before it's too late.

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## SKIN CARE UPDATE

# The "hidden" problem that forces millions of women to wear pants... and the natural solution!

Formerly available only through dermatologists, this amazing cream eliminates ugly spider veins in just weeks.

by Melinda Walthington



It's estimated that half of the adult female population is plagued by spider veins! Small, thin veins lying close to the skin's surface, spider veins are red or blue in color. They may appear in true "spider" fashion, with web-like

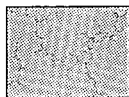
groups of veins radiating out from a central area, they can look like fine lines or appear in "starburst" clusters. Although men are not immune to spider veins, they are overwhelmingly a female problem. Unlike large, bulging varicose veins that can cause pain and even lead to serious health problems, spider veins are primarily a cosmetic problem.

Not even proper diet and exercise are guaranteed to prevent unsightly spider veins. They tend to be hereditary, and worsen as we age. Aside from changing the way you dress, using concealing makeup or resorting to expensive treatments, there has been little you could do to get rid of spider veins—until now!

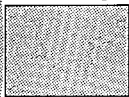
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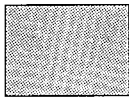
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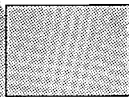
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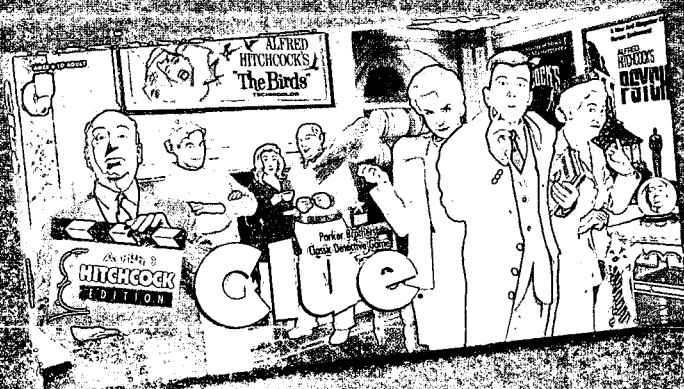
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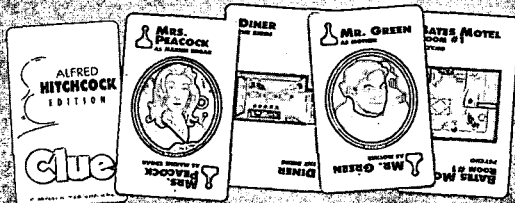
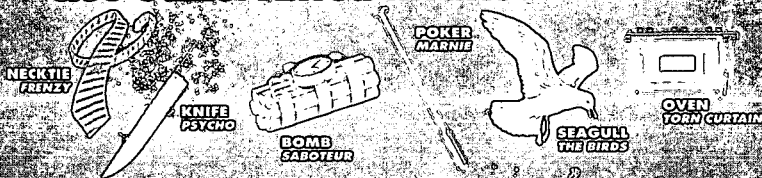
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